

THE CHALLENGES OF PASTORAL COUNSELING IN RURAL AMERICA:  
SHAPING A BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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ADAM KIPP  
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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis-project is to provide a deeper understanding of the pastoral counseling challenges faced by rural ministers and to create a resource to aid them in addressing those challenges. This thesis begins by defining rural and painting a picture of the current state of rural America. This is followed up by a survey of rural pastors focusing on the issues and struggles they encounter in the course of their ministry, the results of which show that rural pastors are faced with a large breadth of issues that they do not feel prepared to address as pastoral counselors. This thesis then explores Peter's calling for pastors to serve as shepherds of God's flock, including the need for pastoral care, even if it is not easy. Next it explores the array of resources potentially available to rural pastors to help them as pastoral counselors, although few works are available that meet the specific needs of rural pastors. Finally a quick reference counseling guide was put together with rural ministry specifically in mind. This guide addresses five of the most common issues faced by rural pastors: depression, worry, conflict, anger, and abuse. Critical reviews from five rural pastors show that the reference guide would be a welcome help and encouragement to rural pastors.



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING

#### **The Call**

I can still remember where I was when the idyllic world of pastoral ministry in a rural context came crumbling down around me. It was my day off, and I was outside in the back yard raking leaves on a sunny fall afternoon. My wife called out to me that I needed to come in, now. A young woman in our church had just attempted suicide by overdose. Her husband had found her, and the paramedics were on their way. I was shocked and at a loss for words when I talked to the husband. The best I could come up with was, “I’ll come over and we can talk in a bit after the paramedics clear out.” But what would we talk about? What was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to say? I had no idea. I had never dealt with anything like this.

I was fresh out of seminary with barely a year of experience under my belt. I had come out of school ready to change the world and was passionate to preach the word (2 Tim 4:2). Up until that point, my ministry had been preaching on Sunday, teaching in Sunday school, and teaching in youth group. In seminary I had a large number of classes focused on equipping me to do just that: five classes in Greek, four classes in Hebrew, six classes on systematic theology, four classes on preaching, and classes covering every book of the Bible. But in that moment all of those classes seemed to fall short of what I needed.

In seminary I had only one class on counseling. It focused on driving home a balanced approach to counseling by integrating psychological and biblical truths in a

theoretical way. There was never anything even close to a discussion on “when someone in your congregation attempts suicide, this is what you should do.” To be fair, classes addressing those issues were offered in seminary, but they were electives rather than required courses. The difficult truth is that professors could have recommended those classes on pastoral counseling all they wanted, but I was determined to fill up my electives with classes focusing on things that seemed more important to me at the time: preaching, leadership, and church planting. In seminary I did not have a concept of the personal side of pastoral ministry, pastoral counseling. I did not understand its importance or the challenges I would face in rural ministry.

My context of rural ministry made that call I received so shocking. I was ministering at a small independent Bible church in rural Illinois. Many who pass through Washington, Illinois, compare it with Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*. We have a town square with quaint antique shops. We have a nativity in the center of our town square every year at Christmastime. My office looks out on a corn field.<sup>1</sup> There was some part of me that thought, “Those types of things don’t happen in a community like ours. Those types of problems happen in the big cities and in the suburbs, but not in our little town, not in my little church.” But when I received that call, those misconceptions about what pastoral ministry is, and about the ways I would be called to minister in my rural, small town, came crumbling down.

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1. Or a soybean field, depending on the crop rotation.

## Defining “Rural”

The word *rural* has been used a number of times in this chapter already, and because there are degrees of rural<sup>2</sup> most people think of something different when they read the word. For a suburbanite who went to one of largest public universities in the United States, and attended seminary in Dallas, Texas, the twenty-minute drive through cornfields and past grain elevators to the town of Washington, Illinois, with its fifteen thousand residents seemed extremely rural.<sup>3</sup> During that first drive in I remember thinking, “How long will these cornfields keep going?” However, one of the twenty-seven hundred people living in Valentine, Nebraska,<sup>4</sup> would likely laugh at the idea of a town as large Washington being considered rural by anyone. If one were to drive an hour west of Valentine to the village of Cody, Nebraska, population 154,<sup>5</sup> where it is a daylong trip to go to Walmart and back, a place like Valentine might not seem so rural.

Because the idea of rural can be such a shifting scale for people, it is an idea that can be hard to define. In fact, the US government has numerous definitions of rural. The US Census Bureau defines urban areas as those with populations of fifty thousand people or more, urban clusters as those with at least twenty-five hundred and fewer than fifty thousand, and rural areas as those populations, housings, and territories not included in urban areas.<sup>6</sup> For them, rural refers to areas with a population of twenty-four hundred ninety-nine or fewer. The US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), which has 24 percent

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2. K. M. Slama, “Rural Culture Is a Diversity Issue,” *Minnesota Psychologist* (January 2004): 9-13.

3. United States Census Bureau, “American FactFinder,” accessed March 17, 2016, [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml).

4. United States Census Bureau, “American FactFinder.”

5. United States Census Bureau, “American FactFinder.”

6. United States Census Bureau, “Geography,” accessed March 17, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html>.

of its veterans in rural communities, has its own definition.<sup>7</sup> Like the census bureau, the VA begins with urban areas, defining them as census tracts with at least 30 percent of the population residing in an urbanized area as defined by the census bureau. However, they delineate rural and highly rural areas rather than urban clusters. Rural areas are land areas not designated as urban, and highly rural areas are those sparsely populated areas where less than 10 percent of the working population commutes to any community larger than an urbanized cluster, which is typically a town of no more than twenty-five hundred people.<sup>8</sup> The US Department of Agriculture, understating this shifting scale, determined its own definition of rural based on a numerical system known as the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. This allows for broader understanding of urban and rural, with 1 representing counties in metro areas with populations of one million or more and 9 representing completely rural areas or those with populations less than twenty-five hundred not adjacent to a metro area.<sup>9</sup> Using those two ends of the scale a gradient from 2 to 8 is used to define the levels of urban and rural in between. This multitude of shifting definitions that try to balance geography and population numbers as well as population density and industrialization can be a bit overwhelming to sort through.

Because of this I would like to propose a different definition of rural, one that is based not so much on population data but rather on the worldview, or mindset, of the people living in an area. “‘Rural’ is a way of thinking that arises from a lifestyle and livelihood directly dependent upon the land (usually farming and ranching) and/or the

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7. United States Department of Veterans Affairs, “Office of Rural Health,” accessed March 17, 2106, <http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/about/rural-veterans.asp>.

8. VA, “Office of Rural Health.”

9. United States Department of Agriculture, “Rural-Urban Continuum Codes,” accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation.aspx>.

extraction of natural resources (such as mining, fishing, hunting, and logging).”<sup>10</sup> The counterpart to this would see urban areas as those where the “way of thinking that arises from a lifestyle and livelihood directly dependent upon a system of commerce that produces and provides goods, services, and information.”<sup>11</sup>

According to these definitions, rural and urban communities are not defined so much by a specific population number but by a way of life and thinking. This definition still ties to things like geography and population data because those in Nebraska, for example, are much more likely to live off the land, which is readily available in a sparsely populated region, and therefore more likely to have a rural mindset. But what is the mindset that makes a community rural? What is the difference between an urban and rural mindset?

This idea is explored further in *Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era*. In it, eleven contrasting characteristics are addressed that differentiate between the rural and urban mindset: understanding of size, approach to community, view of planning, perfectionism, finances, outlook on life, attitude toward time, work, relations to people, and decision making.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on these characteristics of the rural mindset, I believe three will prove especially pertinent to this discussion of the rural mindset in relation to pastoral counseling: success, work, and community.

According to the authors of *Leading Through Change*, for many with an urban mindset success is determined by advancement: do I have a bigger house than five years ago, did I get promoted, am I making more money, or even is my church continuing to

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10. Marty Giese, “A Pastoral Training Program for Rural Churches” (master of arts research project, Moody Bible Institute, 1993), 202-3.

11. Giese, “Pastoral Training Program for Rural Churches,” 202-3.

12. Barney Wells, Martin Giese, and Ron Klassen, *Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2005), 23-36.

grow in attendance? However, those with a rural mindset often find success in survival.

“Because of ongoing economic hardship and other crisis regularly encountered by agrarians—such as fluctuating markets (sometimes drastically so), bad weather, cattle diseases, and crop failures—they may define success as making it another year. Many of their friends may not have made it, which makes their survival an achievement.”<sup>13</sup> For those with a rural mindset, getting by can be seen as the pinnacle of the pyramid of life rather than a basic foundation upon which they might build more auspicious goals.<sup>14</sup>

Also, those with a rural mindset may understand “real” work differently than do their urban counterparts. Those with a rural mindset are more likely to define work as “manual labor. Desk work, or mental work, may not be viewed with the same respect.”<sup>15</sup> To a farmer who gets up at five in the morning and works from sunup to sundown in the fields, the job of an accountant or pastor might seem simple—after all, they are sitting around in their chair all day without even breaking a sweat. In contrast, accountants might congratulate themselves for their hard work and dedication in schooling so that they can work at their desk and not have to work tirelessly in the fields. In this contrast we can see the way those in urban areas and rural areas might view the same types of work in very different ways.

A third differentiating characteristic between the urban and rural mindset that should be addressed is the approach to community. When many people, myself included, think of rural ministry, a close, tight-knit community is one of the first things that comes to mind, but the reality is a bit more complicated than that:

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13. Wells, Giese, and Klassen, *Leading Through Change*, 26-27.

14. Wells, Giese, and Klassen, *Leading Through Change*, 27.

15. Wells, Giese, and Klassen, *Leading Through Change*, 33.

Historically, agrarians are independent, likely due to their isolation. Today they continue to be protective of that independence. Cosmopolitans, by contrast, tend to be more interdependent. They are more accustomed to working together to achieve strategic goals. For agrarians, interdependence and cooperative effort are concessions they make only for survival. When an essential task is too big or complex to accomplish independently, they will form a temporary alliance to see it done.<sup>16</sup>

Those living in urban environments are used to working with and relying heavily on others; that is how the city works. But in a rural environment, independence and self-sufficiency are key. While those in rural communities certainly care for and look after one another, asking others to sacrifice their independence to come and help them on a regular basis would be seen as a sign of weakness.

But one might ask, “Can’t those mindsets apply to many in urban contexts as well? Aren’t there city dwellers who see success as survival, value manual labor as work, and who want to be independent? And aren’t there people in rural communities who see success as advancement, and the value of mental work, who seek out interdependent relationships?” Absolutely; it is happening more and more as urban dwellers leave the city in favor of countryside commutes. My father is an example of this, as he grew up in rural Ohio but later moved to a bustling suburb. He values survival over accomplishment. He would much rather spend the day outside working than in, although years in the city have given him a great appreciation for interdependent relationships. Rural is not something defined only by population data or where a person lives. It is a mindset that people take with them whether they are in big cities or small towns.

This definition of rural, as a mindset, is also helpful for understanding my ministry context. The town I minister in has more than fifteen thousand people in it,

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16. Wells, Giese, and Klassen, *Leading Through Change*, 28-29.

which would disqualify it from being considered rural based on population data alone. But it is also a town that has grown and expanded in the past few decades but has roots as a farming community. In my church we have older families with more rural mindsets worshiping alongside younger ones who have moved in so their family can have the quaint small-town experience while they commute to work across the river in Peoria. Seeing rural as a measure of population data would not allow me to understand my church in this way, but when one sees urban and rural as mindsets it allows for a deeper understanding.

### **The Reality of Rural Ministry**

Even though I recognized this rural mindset in my community when I began my ministry, I still had some misconceptions about what rural ministry was. I had a picturesque, Norman Rockwell view of rural ministry. When I saw the fields of corn, the combines, the cozy town square; when I drove through town and saw kids happily riding bikes every which way, a subconscious part of me assumed rural ministry meant ministry in a place that is wholesome and pure, free from the troubles of the modern city, in a place that harkens back to a simpler time in history. When I left behind Dallas, where people would leave their car doors unlocked so someone breaking in would not break the window, for Washington, Illinois, where people would leave their cars unlocked because they could, a part of me thought that big-city problems would be left behind. But when I received that first call about a suicide attempt on a sunny fall afternoon, it was not that the problems of the city had made their way to my rural ministry. Rather, it was a wake-up call to the truth that the problems of sin and brokenness are present everywhere.



This was a personal revelation for me, but it is not a new truth. Studies have shown that rural residents have higher rates of suicide than their urban counterparts.<sup>17</sup> But it is not only suicide that is an issue in rural America. “Research indicates that rural populations suffer from mood, anxiety, trauma, cognitive, developmental, and psychotic disorders at levels as high as those in urban areas.”<sup>18</sup> The research on alcohol abuse is even more distressing:

Approximately 56 percent of adult nonmetropolitan dwellers have been identified as current drinkers, with more than 6 percent manifesting three or more signs of physiologic alcohol dependence, and more than 14 percent experiencing two or more social consequences of heavy drinking. A 52 percent rate of alcohol use in the past 30 days has been found among rural 12th graders.<sup>19</sup>

Suicide, alcohol abuse, anxiety, and more are not just big-city problems; they are rural ones. In fact, they seem to be more prevalent in rural communities than urban ones.

As troubling as these statistics are, they become more so when one connects them with an understanding of the rural mindset. Those in rural communities think about the problems they face differently than do their urban counterparts. For instance, those in rural populations often view success as survival. Therefore, if they are struggling with depression, anxiety, or alcoholism but are holding things together, even by a thread, they may see that as success. For them, holding things together does not mean they have a problem; it means that they have attained their goal. The idea of growing and maturing and developing their inner self and relationships may be seen as superfluous. This idea dovetails into another difficult aspect of the rural mindset, and that is their understanding

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17. Megan Oetinger, “The Decision and Rewards of Practicing Psychology in a Rural Area” (PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2008), 8.

18. Oetinger, “Decision and Rewards of Practicing Psychology in a Rural Area,” 8.

19. L. W Roberts, J. Battaglia, and R. S. Epstein, “Frontier Ethics: Mental Health Care Needs and Ethical Dilemmas in Rural Communities,” *Psychiatric Services* 50, no. 4 (1999): 497-503.

of work. Personal reflection, talking about feelings, and exploring their past may not be valued. In fact, they may be looked down on as suburban navel gazing more suited for soccer moms than for people who do real work. Also, those in rural communities see independence as a virtue. This means that if they are struggling with an issue in their life for which they might seek counseling, often their instinct will not be to talk to someone or get help but to try and take care of it on their own. If they do seek help, in many cases it will come only as a last resort after they have stopped surviving. By then, the issue they face has gotten so out of control that they cannot ignore it any longer.

These are not merely observations but facts that have been shown to be true in rural America. Studies have shown a distinct “lack of interest in institutionalized services, and some antipathy towards middle-class, urban practices that focus on self-reflection.”<sup>20</sup> Making matters worse, even if someone in a rural community wanted to seek help for a counseling issue, “across the 3,075 counties in the United States, 55% had no practicing psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers, and all of these counties were rural.”<sup>21</sup>

Together these statistics paint a distressing picture of rural America. Those in rural communities face the same difficulties as their urban counterparts—even more so in some cases—yet they are skeptical of embracing help from counselors and psychiatrists, both because they see that as something for middle-class suburbanites and because it conflicts with a self-sufficient rural mindset. In those cases where someone in a rural context is willing to seek help, there is a good chance that no help is available.

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20. A. Barbopoulos and J. M. Clark, “Practicing Psychology in Rural Settings: Issues and Guidelines,” *Canadian Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2003): 410-24.

21. New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, Subcommittee on Rural Issues: Background Paper (Rockville, MD: DHHS Pub. No. SMA-04-3890, 2004).

However, there is often one person in the rural context who is available, with whom it is perfectly acceptable to talk to and meet, someone who is seen as knowledgeable, discreet, and willing to help. That person is the local pastor. In a rural context, meeting with a counselor or psychiatrist might be seen as a shameful thing, but talking with the pastor is different. There is still the possible embarrassment of people wondering, “Why did I see your truck outside the church yesterday afternoon?” But if troubles arise, and people feel the need to talk to someone, they may feel that the local pastor is their best option. Having explored rural ministry, the question remains: Are local pastors prepared to face these issues that will be brought to them?

### **Hypothesis**

When I was faced with these issues as a young pastor, I did not feel prepared. I felt overwhelmed by the need I faced and unequipped for the pastoral counseling I was asked to do. I write of it in the past tense, but there are still times when I feel that way. While this is my personal experience I do not believe that I am alone. It is my hypothesis that rural pastors do not feel adequately prepared for the pastoral counseling challenges they face in rural ministry.

This is something I will explore in the paper that follows. While studies have been done on the issues faced in rural areas and on the experiences of the limited number of counselors who practice in a rural context, I am not aware of any research focusing specifically on pastoral care in a rural context. This is where I will start, researching the pastoral counseling issues that pastors face as they minister among rural people, how prepared they feel to address those issues, and how they are seeking to prepare

themselves. From there I will establish the biblical foundation for pastoral care and look at the resources currently available to help rural pastors address the issues they face.

However, the ultimate goal of this work is not simply to gather and verify data about pastoral counseling in a rural context but to put together a guide that rural pastors might use when faced with difficult pastoral counseling situations. When I received the call that fall afternoon, I was dumbfounded and overwhelmed; I had no idea what to do.

Thankfully I had godly men I knew I could call for help and insight. I know that every pastor may not have those resources available. I hope to provide such resources through this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PROJECT DESIGN AND RESULTS, PART 1: GATHERING DATA

#### **The Need for More Information**

It is simple to write that I believe that rural pastors do not feel adequately prepared for the pastoral counseling challenges they face in rural ministry. I could show it through anecdotal or qualitative evidence<sup>1</sup> from myself and other rural pastors, but I am not aware of any actual quantitative data that specifically looks at pastoral counseling in a rural context. Part of this may be that our culture marginalizes small churches,<sup>2</sup> let alone rural ones. Part of it may be from the sheer difficulty of finding and connecting with rural pastors. Part of it may also be that even if one could find and connect with rural pastors, pastoral counseling is a much more intimate topic to discuss than their doctrine on the inerrancy of Scripture. Whatever the reason, one thing is clear: pastoral counseling in a rural context is an issue that has yet to be studied in depth. Because of this lack of information a foundational part of this project is researching pastoral counseling in a rural context, what issues pastors are facing, and how prepared they are to address them, in a quantitative way.

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1. See the books discussed as part of the Rural Ministry section of the literature review in chapter 4.

2. “I’m saying if you don’t go to a church large enough where you can have enough Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers to separate them so they can have small groups and grow up the local church, you are a selfish adult. Get over it. Find yourself a big old church where your kids can connect with a bunch of people and grow up and love the local church.” Andy Stanley, “Saved by the Church,” accessed March 21, 2016, <http://northpoint.org/messages/saved-by-the-church/>.

## **Connecting with Rural Pastors**

The first challenge I faced in gathering data on pastoral counseling in a rural context was finding a way to connect with rural pastors. Thankfully, over the past eight years in ministry I have developed a relationship<sup>3</sup> with the Rural Home Missionary Association, or RHMA. Their purpose is “to plant and to strengthen churches in small-town America (usually towns of 5,000 or less) . . . in such a way that believers are equipped to serve the Lord effectively as He works through them to build His church.”<sup>4</sup> While other mission agencies rightfully focus on sending missionaries overseas to places with limited access to the gospel, RHMA looks for such opportunities stateside, supporting churches and sending missionaries to rural America that might not have immediate access to a local, Bible-believing church.

As part of this mission RHMA hosts a number of seminars and conferences across the United States geared toward rural pastors. Included in this is their Annual Small-Town Pastors Conference held in Morton, Illinois, just one town over from my own. This conference attracts more than four hundred attendees<sup>5</sup> on a yearly basis. In partnership with RHMA I was allowed to offer a survey on pastoral counseling in the rural context to attendees of their conference held in April 2016. This conference provided a unique opportunity to connect with rural pastors.

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3. This includes a mentoring relationship with the executive director, multiple work trips, and a position on their board starting in 2015.

4. Rural Home Missionary Association, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://rhma.org/index.php/about-rhma>.

5. This number also includes pastors' wives.

## Putting Together the Survey

Having found a way to connect with rural pastors, the next challenge was to find a way to gather the desired information. Since my desire was to gather quantitative data I decided that an anonymous online survey would provide the best option.<sup>6</sup> Following the conference RHMA customarily emails an online response survey to attendees, and with their support, my survey was sent concurrently to those who had specifically registered to receive it. A copy of the survey that participants were linked to is presented in appendix A. Two things should be noted about the survey presented. First, while a print form of the survey is attached, participants filled out an electronic version of the survey, which was put together and hosted through Wufoo.<sup>7</sup> Second, no numbering was presented on the online survey; it has been added here to better facilitate discussion.

## Structure

Although not specifically indicated, the survey is broken up into three sections. The first section, questions 1-3, focuses on the reality of pastoral counseling in a rural context. These questions are to help me understand how much time pastors spend counseling, as well as the specific issues and challenges they face. The list of twenty-nine potential issues was culled from a combination of counseling issues addressed in *Christian Counseling* and *The Minister's Guide to Psychological Disorders and*

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6. This survey was put together in conjunction with Bryan Auday, professor of psychology and consultant for research methodology instruction at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

7. A subsidiary company of the more well-known online survey host Survey Monkey.

*Treatments*,<sup>8</sup> as well as topics discussed in the 2016 Pastor as Counselor residency through Gordon Conwell's doctor of ministry program.

The second section, questions 4-9, focuses on rural pastors' response to the counseling needs they are facing. In this section I am seeking information on how pastors work to address the pastoral counseling challenges they face: through referral, books, continuing education, or other equipping resources. In partnership with RHMA I also included a question for pastors on how RHMA could specifically help them as pastoral counselors. Question 5 is perhaps the most foundational question in the survey, one that links directly to my hypothesis: "Please indicate your current level of preparedness to address the counseling needs you face in your ministry."

The final section of the survey seeks demographic information from the participants such as their level of education, the size of the town they minister in, and their number of years in ministry. This information is so that the results of the survey can be sorted and filtered.

### Special Considerations

It is my hope that rural ministry and the rural mindset are uniquely reflected in this survey. For instance, in question 1, when asking about time spent in counseling each week, I mention both formal and informal counseling, anticipating that for rural pastors much of their counseling is done in homes, in the field, or over coffee at the town diner.

I also sought to be clear in the terms and words used. For example, when putting together the list of counseling situations in question 2 I initially had "anxiety" listed as an option because I know it is a common problem and a large number of anxiety disorders

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8. See chapter 4, the literature review.



are addressed in counseling books like the *DSM-5*. When talking to a fellow rural pastor about the list of counseling situations, he asked about fear and panic attacks. Both of these would be listed as anxiety disorders in the *DSM-5*, but because he was not familiar with that terminology he did not associate fear and panic attacks with anxiety.<sup>9</sup> In light of this feedback, I removed anxiety from the list of potential counseling situations and replaced this single idea with three common types of anxiety: fear, panic attacks, and worry.

Another area in which the rural mindset was most strongly taken into account was the question at the heart of the survey, question 5, “Please indicate your current level of preparedness to address the counseling needs you face in your ministry.” As has already been mentioned, those with the rural mindset tend to be more self-sufficient, independent, and reluctant to share personal struggles. Pastors serving in rural ministry may bemoan this problem without even thinking that it might apply to them as well. It is not an easy thing for rural pastors, or any pastor for that matter, to say that they struggle with something, like pastoral counseling, even in an anonymous online survey.

To help alleviate this tension I moved a single demographic question up before question 5: “During the course of your education how many classes have you had that seek to prepare you for the counseling needs you face in ministry?” My hope was that in asking this question first, it would provide a framework of thought for pastors to understand the following question, about their personal preparedness, as a reflection of the educational system rather than their own efforts and abilities as pastors. In short, I hoped that pastors could say to themselves, “I only had one class on counseling in the

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9. In retrospect I would not have either, until I started working on this project.

first place, so why shouldn't I feel poorly prepared?" rather than feeling poorly prepared and thinking of it as a poor reflection on their service as rural pastors.

### **Offering the Survey**

On Monday, April 18, 2016, during the dinner meal at RHMA's annual conference, an announcement was made that I had put together a survey hoping to better understand pastoral counseling in a rural context, and that anyone who was interested could sign up with me. Over the course of two days I had 61 participants sign up for the survey itself. On April 25 the survey was emailed out to those who responded. From that group of 61, 38 surveys were completed. Even though the response rate was just above 60%, 38 responses meant that my finding would be statistically viable,<sup>10</sup> thus allowing me to generalize the results beyond my initial sampling of rural pastors. The results of the survey are presented below.

### **Survey Results**

#### **The Reality of Rural America**

As has been previously mentioned, when many people think of rural America they think of a simpler, purer place where the problems of the modern world are left behind. Previous research had suggested that this was not the case, a fact which was once again confirmed in my own findings. I think many people would be surprised at the sheer expanse of issues faced by rural pastors in the course of ministry. The following table reflects issues that pastors have faced at least once in the course of their ministry.

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10. A sample size of 30 is generally accepted as the minimum sample size needed for statistical viability.

**Table 1: Pastoral counseling issues encountered in the course of ministry**

<b>Issue encountered in counseling</b>	<b>% of rural pastors who encountered the issue</b>
Anger	89.5
Grief	86.8
Marriage counseling	86.8
Depression	84.2
Cancer	78.9
Conflict resolution	78.9
Divorce	78.9
Guilt	68.4
Worry	68.4
Adultery	65.8
Alcoholism	65.8
Fear	65.8
Loneliness	65.8
Financial counseling	60.5
Suicide	57.9
Drug addiction	52.6
Domestic abuse	47.4
Child abuse	44.7
Bipolar disorder	36.8
Abortion	34.2
Homosexuality	31.6
Infertility	28.9
Panic attacks	26.3
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	23.7
Autism	21.1
Eating disorders	21.1
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	21.1
Gambling addiction	15.8
Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder	13.2

The top end of these results is not surprising. Many people would likely expect rural pastors to be called upon to help provide marriage counseling to a young couple, to

comfort a widow in her time of grief, and perhaps even have an encounter with an alcoholic husband.

What was surprising was the sheer breadth of the results. Out of 29 issues listed, every single one had been encountered by at least one of the pastors in the course of ministry. Almost half of the pastors surveyed had encountered issues such as suicide, drug addiction, spousal abuse, and child abuse. Even on the lower end of things, one in four pastors had been asked to come alongside someone suffering from issues like panic attacks or bipolar disorder, or struggling with homosexuality. These are not issues that people often think of in conjunction with rural America, or that pastors may expect to be called on to help with, but the reality is that these issues and struggles are not isolated to big cities and suburbs.

When looking at these results it is also worth noting that pastors from a number of different-sized rural areas participated in the survey, some from towns with populations of 0-499 and others, like my own on the outskirts of rural America, with populations of upwards of 15,000. What is interesting is that when the total number of issues faced by pastors was compared with the size of the town they ministered in, there was no correlation between the two.<sup>11</sup> The breadth of issues pastors faced did not directly increase as the population of the town they ministered in increased. As such, my results

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11.  $r(38) = .178$ ,  $p = .285$ . For those interested in statistical data, the findings here and throughout are represented with the equation  $r(x) = y$ ,  $p = z$ . In the formula,  $r(x) = y$   $r$  represents the correlation between two sets of data where  $x$  is the total number of responses in the data set.  $r(x)$  is measured on a scale from 1 to -1. A positive number, or positive correlation, means that two values increase together, such as feelings of preparedness and education in the presented study. Negative  $r(x)$  values indicate that as one set increases the other decreases. No negative correlations are presented in these findings. Also, as the  $r(x)$  value increases between 0 and 1, the correlation between the data sets is stronger and stronger. The  $p$  value is measured on a scale from 0 to 1 and represents the significance of the result.  $P$  values of .05 or less are a strong indication that the results show a true and significant correlation.

seem to once again debunk the stereotype of the quaint, idyllic, rural town. Smaller places do not necessarily have fewer problems than big places.

In question 3 on the survey, pastors were also asked to share the five most common issues they faced in the course of their ministry. Although the table presented may look like the first one, there is an important difference. The first table looked at whether a pastor had faced an issue *at all* over the course of their ministry. This table looks at the *most common* issues faced in their ministry. So, if a pastor had faced child abuse only one time in his fifteen years of ministry, it would have shown up as in the first chart, but that singular event would not be reflected in this one, which focuses on the most prevalent issues pastors face.

**Table 2: Top five most common counseling issues**

<b>Pastoral counseling issue</b>	<b>Number of pastors who ranked issue in their top five</b>
Conflict resolution	24
Grief	21
Depression	19
Marriage counseling	16
Divorce	15
Anger	14
Cancer	12
Worry	10
Child abuse	9
Financial counseling	9
Adultery	7
Guilt	4
Loneliness	4
Abortion	3
Drug addiction	3
Alcoholism	2
Domestic abuse	2
Gambling addiction	2
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	2
Bipolar disorder	1
Infertility	1
Suicide	1
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	0
Autism	0
Eating disorders	0
Fear	0
Homosexuality	0
Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder	0
Panic attacks	0

This shows that while homosexuality, bipolar disorder, and PTSD may arise during the course of a rural pastor's ministry, these issues are unlikely to be predominant ones. Instead, the most common issues pastors are likely to face are things like conflict resolution, grief, depression, anger, and marriage issues. This is important to understand

moving forward with this project because my hope is not just to understand the reality of pastoral counseling in rural America but also to help pastors respond. When looking at how to help them respond, my focus will fall more on these primary issues.

### Rural Pastors' Response

As important as it is to understand what issues are pastors are facing in rural America, it is also important to understand how they respond. As the table below shows, there is a struggle. None of the pastors surveyed felt poorly prepared. Also, more than 5% felt they were excellently prepared while the rest were somewhere in the middle. In fact, 57.9% of pastors surveyed felt their preparation was average or less. This would seem to agree with my hypothesis that pastors in rural America generally do not feel adequately prepared for the pastoral counseling challenges they are facing.

**Table 3: Pastors' perceptions about preparedness**

<b>How prepared do you feel to address the counseling need you face in ministry?</b>	
<b>Perceived preparedness</b>	<b>%</b>
Poor	0
Fair	26.3
Average	31.6
Good	36.8
Excellent	5.3

The research also shows that it is not an issue that pastors can choose to ignore, no matter how much they might prefer to stick to preaching and teaching. The chart below shows the average amount of time pastors spend in pastoral counseling on an average week.

**Table 4: Hours spent counseling per week**

<b>Hours</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than 1	23.7
1-2 hours	39.5
3-4 hours	23.7
5-6 hours	10.5
7-8 hours	2.6

These results show a varied response in terms of hours spent counseling.<sup>12</sup> However, what is most interesting is what the results do not show. I would have expected to see a correlation between how many hours a pastor spends counseling each week and their level or preparedness, that pastors who feel good or excellent about their counseling abilities would spend more hours counseling and those who feel fair to average would spend less time. However no statistical correlation could be shown connecting these two ideas.<sup>13</sup> In fact, there was no correlation between time spent counseling and a number of issues that one might expect such as education, years in ministry, or population. The only statistic in the data that correlates to the number of hours a pastor spends counseling in a given week is the number of different issues the pastor had faced over the course of ministry.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that the greater number of issues a pastor has faced in the course of ministry, the more hours the pastor is likely to spend counseling, which makes sense because the more issues a pastor faces, the more time that pastor will spend counseling. This is an important reminder to pastors that they cannot hide from, ignore, or put off

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12. The diversity of response may also stem from pastors interpreting what the term “pastoral counseling” looks like in their ministry in a variety of different ways.

13.  $r(38)=-.163$ ,  $p=.329$ . The lack of correlation between preparedness and time spent counseling could also have arisen due to errors in the survey with regard to pastors’ responses about their preparedness for pastoral counseling. The survey inquired how prepared pastors feel, not how prepared they are. Many people know of a pastor who might feel greatly prepared and gifted in the pulpit but whose parishioners might disagree. In a similar way it is possible that some pastors might think they are prepared to offer pastoral counseling but might spend very little time doing it because their parishioners do not feel the same.

14.  $r(38)=.356$ ,  $p=.028$ .



pastoral counseling. Over the course of their ministry they are going to have to face it whether they feel prepared to or not.

In analyzing the data there was one interesting correlation that should also be acknowledged. While looking at how prepared pastors felt in their role of pastoral counselors, I sought out any statistic that might have a positive correlation, anything that might have positive relationship to how prepared pastors feel with respect to their skills as pastoral counselors. While most of the data did not yield any correlations, one set of statistics did: responses related to education. In studying the data there was a positive correlation between both the number of classes taken on counseling and pastor's level of education and how prepared the pastors felt for the pastoral counseling challenges they face. The more classes a pastor had taken the more prepared the pastor felt.<sup>15</sup> Also, the higher level of education pastors had attained, the more prepared they felt as pastoral counselors.<sup>16</sup> This logically makes sense and reflects that the more education pastors have on the topic, the more prepared they feel. It also reflects my own journey to know and better understand this area of pastoral ministry.

In seeking to understand this better I looked more closely at pastoral education and other areas of the survey and found a positive correlation between the size of a town a pastor ministers in and their level of education.<sup>17</sup> This sounds like a good thing until it is reworded; the smaller a town a pastor is ministering in, the less likely they are to attain higher levels of education.<sup>18</sup> This is distressing because my survey results have also

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15.  $r(38)=-.508, p=.001$ .

16.  $r(38)=-.331, p=.042$ .

17.  $r(38)=-.491, p=.002$ .

18. This could be due to the more limited resources of such churches in turn limiting a pastor's ability to afford the costs of continued education. It could be due to less value placed on higher education among those with a more rural mindset. This could also indicate that pastors with higher levels of education

shown that education is one of the few things that directly correlates to how prepared pastors feel for the counseling challenges they face. This finding further emphasizes the importance of finding a way to help equip rural pastors who may not feel prepared for the challenges they face as pastoral counselors.

On an encouraging note, it would seem that the availability of helps for rural pastors has increased in the past decade. Previous research had indicated a shortage of professional counseling services available to rural pastors, but when asked about such availability within a one-hour drive of the town that they minister in, a staggering 92.1% were aware of services available, and of those 71.1% were aware of services that they felt comfortable referring a congregant to. The reality of the rural mindset means that not all congregants would be willing or able to accept such referrals, but it is still encouraging and hopeful to see that such helps are becoming more widely available. Such helps would also prove vital for pastors facing some of those rarer and more specialized counseling issues, such as PTSD or bipolar disorder.

## **Conclusion**

Much research had been done in the counseling community to better understand rural America, but little had been done to understand the challenges ministers are facing as pastoral counselors. I sought to remedy this by partnering with the Rural Home Missionary Association and offering a survey on pastoral counseling to rural pastors attending their yearly conference. The results of this survey verified many other published findings, that rural America is facing the same types of challenges and

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are less likely to seek pastorates in rural America. Whatever the reason, this seems like an issue that warrants further study.

struggles as suburban and urban America. It showed that rural pastors are being faced with a wide range of issues and that they do not feel good about how prepared they are to face them. It showed that education concerning these issues can help pastors feel more prepared but that the smaller a town is the less likely that education is to be available. This information validates the need for a project such as mine and the importance of educating and equipping rural pastors for the challenges they face. It has also given me insight into the issues that rural pastors are facing so I can better help them respond.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

#### **Pastoral Counseling and 1 Peter 5:1-4**

As has been shown in the previous chapter, the challenges rural pastors face are many and varied. Outsiders may think about rural communities and assume they represent a simpler, less complicated way of life, but for years rural pastors have been saying differently. The data gathered provide support to those anecdotal observations. Rural ministry is not simple. Rural ministry is not easy. Rural ministry is not a place where pastors can go to escape all the troubles that people struggle with in suburban and urban areas. And more challenging still, many rural pastors do not feel prepared to address the situations that they face.

It is also important to understand that rural pastors do not face this struggle in a vacuum. They still have sermons to prepare, Sunday school classes to teach, prayer meetings to lead, church leadership meetings, church business meetings, or other jobs they may have to supplement their income, not to mention more mundane church responsibilities like cleaning the church or mowing the grass on a regular basis. Rural pastors have come to embrace most of these aspects of their call: they are used to preaching and teaching, they have learned the necessity of church meetings, they may even have discovered that mowing the grass around the church can offer a pleasant distraction and a nice excuse to get out and enjoy the sun. But pastoral counseling is often different; it is hard, it is challenging, it is something many do not feel prepared for and

because of that it can get pushed to the side, and it can become a pastor's last priority instead of a central one.

I do not look down on pastors who do this, because I am sure I have done it myself. It is easy to justify putting off or marginalizing pastoral counseling by saying to ourselves things like "I have been called to preach the Word" or "I am called to plant churches" or "My gifting is more about evangelism than this." For this reason it is important to have a solid biblical foundation in what it means to be a pastor, specifically in terms of pastoral care. It is important for pastors to understand that God has called them to them to do more than preach, or plant, or evangelize; as pastors God has called them to care for the sheep in their flock.

To provide this background I will explore 1 Pet 5:1-4, in which pastors are called to be shepherds of their flock.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.<sup>1</sup>

This passage seems especially appropriate for pastors in rural ministry because even if they do not have an agrarian background, through their parishioners they have likely been exposed to what it means to care for flocks and herds, knowing that caring for a flock involves much more work and sacrifice than simply feeding them.

This study will begin by looking at the background to the passage and providing insight into its original context. From there it will work through Peter's words, first

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1. Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (1984).

looking at the call to “be shepherds” and providing a brief overview of the biblical imagery of shepherds. Next it will explore Peter’s three “not . . . but” statements to shepherds about how they should serve. Finally, it will conclude with the encouragement Peter provides through the response of Christ, the Chief Shepherd, to those who have faithfully served as his undershepherds.

### **Background**

First Peter 5 opens with these words: “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed.” To understand the context of the words to follow, it is important to understand the background of the text: who is writing this letter, to whom it is written, and what is meant by elders.

### **Author**

Since the book of 1 Peter opens with “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,” one does not need to look far for the most likely author, Peter the apostle of Christ. There are other potential references to Peter within the letter itself. The author’s reference to himself as “a witness of Christ’s sufferings” in 1 Pet 5:1 adds assurance that this letter was written by Simon Peter of the Gospel accounts as opposed to another, previously unknown apostle by the name of Peter. Also, 1 Peter references Silas,<sup>2</sup> a potential amanuensis,<sup>3</sup> in 1

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2. 1 Pet 5:12.

3. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 6. This could also explain what has been challenged as the excellent Greek in a letter that was supposedly written by a Galilean fisherman.

Pet 5:13; he may be the same Silas that Peter sent to join Paul in Antioch.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Mark mentioned in 1 Pet 5:13 likely refers to John Mark, who is referenced in the account of Peter's miraculous escape from jail.<sup>5</sup> "Both such references as these and together and the strong, early reception of the letter by the church led to the almost universal acceptance of it as from Peter."<sup>6</sup>

This is especially relevant to the passage being explored in this text, because in Peter's encounter with the risen Lord three times he is challenged: "Feed my lambs,"<sup>7</sup> "Take care of my sheep,"<sup>8</sup> and "Feed my sheep."<sup>9</sup> In this passage the same Peter challenges pastors, "Be shepherds of God's flock," passing on the charge he received to a new generation of church leaders.

### Original Recipients

Peter's letter is addressed to "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia."<sup>10</sup> These places represent churches located in Roman provinces in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. Peter's letter would have been delivered from Rome<sup>11</sup> to each of the churches in succession in a roughly circular fashion.<sup>12</sup>

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4. Acts 15:22.

5. Acts 12:12.

6. Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12: *Hebrews—Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 210.

7. John 21:15.

8. John 21:16.

9. John 21:17.

10. 1 Pet 1:1.

11. Babylon, as referenced in 1 Pet 5:13.

12. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary 37 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 52.

## To the Elders

Of more pertinent importance to this particular study is who Peter was referring to when he addressed 1 Pet 5:1 “to the elders among you.” The term *elder* can be confusing to modern readers because in the two thousand years since Peter wrote his letter a great number of different church denominations and governments have risen up which understand and apply the term *elder* in different ways. “When most Christians hear of church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisors to the pastor. They think of elders as policymakers, financial officers, fundraisers or administrators.”<sup>13</sup> This was certainly the case in the Grace Brethren church I grew up in. Elders were a group of laypersons in the church who were elected to serve alongside the church’s pastors. And yet I have the feeling that if those elders were to read through 1 Pet 5 they would think to themselves, “That’s not talking about me, it’s talking about pastors.” This idea betrays our culture’s woeful misunderstanding of what it means to be an elder<sup>14</sup> and points to a truth that is often taken for granted: in most churches pastors serve as elders, whether they are given that specific title or not.

When Peter writes of church elders he is not using a new term. As far back as Exodus<sup>15</sup> there have been elders serving among God’s people. As the term implies, the word *elder* has roots in age, specifically an older man with a full beard.<sup>16</sup> However, more

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13. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and expanded ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 15.

14. This topic is too exhaustive to be addressed here. For more information see Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*.

15. Exod 3:16.

16. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. J. G. Botterwick, H.-J. Fabry, and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 4:122-31; H. Klengel, “Zu den sbutum in altbabylonischer Zeit,” *Orientalia* 29 (1960): 357-75; J. L. McKenzie, “The Elders in the Old Testament,” *Biblica* 40 (1959):



than age, the focus of the term *elder* is on the wisdom and spiritual discernment that often come with age. In the Old Testament elders were the spiritual leaders who helped guide Israel. In Deut 1:13 they are described as “wise, understanding and respected men.” Depending on the time in Israel’s history they are described as presiding over tribes,<sup>17</sup> towns,<sup>18</sup> and even the nation itself.<sup>19</sup>

I believe it is this sense of spiritual leadership and guidance that New Testament authors are referencing when they talk about elders within the local church. Elders are the godly men called upon to provide spiritual guidance in the New Testament church. In modern churches this includes pastors as well as laypersons who serve in positions outlined as elder.<sup>20</sup> In many denominations today the roles of elders and pastors are differentiated, but this does not seem to have been the case in the New Testament church. When Peter speaks here to elders he is speaking to pastors. And it is not just Peter who sees things this way; while in Miletus at the end of this third missionary journey Paul called for the elders from Ephesus to come and meet with him.<sup>21</sup> During that meeting he charges them, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”<sup>22</sup> This is significant because the word for “shepherd” is the same word translated as “pastor” in other places in the New Testament. When Peter and Paul speak to elders they are speaking to what modern readers often understand as pastors.

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522-40; H. Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989); Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1961).

17. Judg 11:5.

18. 1 Sam 16:4.

19. Exod 12:21.

20. This would also include deacons in churches such as mine, where the church is set up with the pastor serving as a singular elder and the deacons serving in leadership alongside him.

21. Acts 20:17.

22. Acts 20:28.

From this we can see that Peter's words written to the elders in the churches in Asia Minor should not be restricted by terms established by denominational practice and church governments but are written for those who provide spiritual direction and leadership for the church, whether they are referred to as elders or pastors.

### **Be Shepherds**

In 1 Pet 5:2, elders are urged to be “be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care.” As was mentioned previously, the word *pastor* comes from the Greek word for “shepherd.” In Eph 4:11, as Paul talks about the gifts God has given to the church he writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” This term *pastor*, which has become so synonymous with a church leader in modern evangelicalism, is most often translated as “shepherd” in the New Testament,<sup>23</sup> as in the shepherds who appeared at Jesus’ birth.<sup>24</sup> The term *pastor* itself does not originate in the Greek; rather it is “an anglicized form of the Latin/French word for shepherd.”<sup>25</sup> The connection between pastor and shepherd continues today for those who are willing to look closer; after all, the word *pastor* has the same root as our word for “pasture,” where flocks and herds go to graze.

While modern readers might be able to see the relation between the words *shepherd* and *pastor*, what is not always obvious to modern pastors is the relation between the two professions, shepherd and pastor. If one were to ask modern-day pastors

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23. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und der Übrigen Urchristlic*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 690.

24. Luke 2:8.

25. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 20 (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2006), 21.

what it means for them to be a pastor, answers might include things like teaching, preaching, planning, office administration, and vision casting, as if being a pastor is rooted in the idea of being a CEO. In many ways the biblical idea of a shepherd, and its implications for modern pastors in terms of care for their congregations, has been lost in time as our culture has become more industrialized and less agrarian. “Sheep and shepherds are unfamiliar sights and the details of the analogy no longer communicate. The change of social structure affects us more deeply than we recognize. It is not only that we are unfamiliar with farms and sheep; it is that we no longer think in such personal and natural terms.”<sup>26</sup> Because of this, even pastors ministering in a rural context may not fully appreciate the depth of history and background that comes with Peter’s call for the church leaders to be shepherds. Therefore it will prove helpful to the study of 1 Pet 5 to explore the biblical imagery of the shepherd.

### Shepherding in Biblical Times

Even before the fall, in the Garden of Eden, it seems that there was a special relationship between man and animal.<sup>27</sup> So it should not come as a surprise that the idea of shepherding flocks arises within a generation after the fall. Adam and Eve’s son Abel is described as keeping flocks.<sup>28</sup> This background and imagery of shepherding is established early in the Old Testament and will continue throughout; “it is important to

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26. Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), 15.

27. Gen 2:19-20.

28. Gen 4:2.

appreciate the prevalence of shepherd and their flocks virtually everywhere in the Promised Land throughout Israel's history."<sup>29</sup>

This is because flocks helped provide for God's people in a number of ways. Some of the ways flocks were utilized thousands of years ago are still common today, such as milk to produce foods like butter and cheese, waste as fertilizer, or wool for clothing. But even with something as common as wool there are differences. Wool may seem commonplace in today's multibillion dollar textile industry, but in ancient Israel wool was valuable enough to be offered as tribute to a king.<sup>30</sup>

However, ancient Israelites utilized their flocks in ways that the modern reader might not immediately think of. For instance, milk from the animals would also provide fat, which could then be used for candles and soap. Even after they died, animals were utilized as their "skins were useful containers for wine and water and served as butter churns."<sup>31</sup>

These animals of the flock were also a vital part of Israel's sacrificial system. Israelites were called to sacrifice lambs on the first Passover as God prepared to bring them out of Egypt.<sup>32</sup> When God established a formal sacrificial system for the newly formed nation, sheep were used for burnt offerings,<sup>33</sup> peace offerings,<sup>34</sup> sin offerings,<sup>35</sup> guilt offerings,<sup>36</sup> and even purification offerings for Nazarites.<sup>37</sup> The offering of sheep

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29. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 46-47.

30. 2 Kgs 3:4.

31. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 53.

32. Exod 12:21.

33. Lev 1:10.

34. Lev 3:6-7.

35. Lev 4:32.

36. Lev 5:5-6.

37. Num 6:12.

also figured prominently into many of Israel's religious festivals, including Passover and the Day of Atonement.<sup>38</sup>

When one understands the many uses of animals from the flock in ancient Israel, especially sheep, it becomes clear why shepherding was common practice and why it was an image that could easily be utilized by biblical authors.

### Shepherds in Biblical Times

Because shepherding was prevalent in ancient Israel it seems that shepherds would be common figures as well. While rural pastors may be familiar with farming and the keeping of flocks, they should also be cautioned that keeping herds and flocks in the rural United States is not the same as it was in the ancient Near East.

Herd owners around the world certainly share similar tasks: feeding, watering, watching for illness, milking, shearing, and so on. But one difference is outstanding. In America's Mid-West you'll find shepherding resembles ranching: sheep are left to graze in vast fenced-in pastures. In the Middle East you'll never find fenced pastures; consequently you'll never find a flock grazing without a shepherd.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore it is important for modern readers, even those familiar with tending flocks in the United States, to understand what it meant to be a shepherd in biblical times.

While the ancient shepherd's duties were varied, they can be summarized in three general categories. Shepherds would feed their flocks, they would protect their flocks, and they would guide them.

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38. Lev 16:3.

39. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Rediscovering Biblical Leadership* (Matthews, NC: ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), 255.

## Shepherds Feed Their Sheep

The first things shepherds needed to do was feed their sheep, making sure they had enough to eat and drink. Without pastures available as they are in the United States, providing adequate water and food for sheep was a regular challenge. The Middle East's climate only intensified the challenges shepherds faced. "In the hot arid summer, sheep must drink water daily or they risk dehydration and death."<sup>40</sup> This made water a valuable, and often contested, commodity. This is exemplified when Jacob meets Rachel for the first time.<sup>41</sup> She is waiting by a well to water her sheep, but she cannot because the other shepherds have not gathered to water theirs and the well is covered by a great stone. The stone helped keep the well water clean, but it had an additional purpose: it restricted the use of the well.<sup>42</sup> The water in the well was greatly valued, so to ensure that any one shepherd did not come and take it all for their flocks a great stone was rolled on top, a stone so great that it would take multiple shepherds to roll it away. The well could not be accessed without other shepherds there to ensure that everyone's flock got their fair share. This is just one example of the lengths shepherds would go to ensure water for their flocks.

Shepherds also needed to provide food for their flocks. This not only meant making sure that flocks had enough food and did not overgraze an area, but also that they had the right nourishing food to eat.<sup>43</sup> Because of this shepherds would constantly lead their sheep from one pasture to another, as opposed to the ranching style of raising sheep often found in the United States. This is a practice still common to shepherds in the

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40. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 54.

41. Gen 29.

42. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 400.

43. W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 28.

Middle East, with some modern shepherds journeying more than fifteen hundred miles annually in an effort to avoid famine and find food for their hungry flocks.<sup>44</sup>

### **Shepherds Guide Their Sheep**

This is why guiding or leading their flocks was another essential part of being a shepherd in biblical times: someone had to get flocks safely from one pasture to another. The term itself helps us understand how it often worked; shepherds would walk in front of their sheep, leading them, as the sheep would follow along behind. The shepherd would trust the sheep to follow and respond to his call. Jesus references this practice in John 10:27 when he says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” But shepherds also had to understand that the journey is not always easy for the flock. Shepherds had to understand the needs of their flock as they guided them from place to place. “The good shepherd must lead with compassion knowing that the pregnant and nursing ewes need more rest and extra nutrition in the winter and spring, as do the lambs and kids. Shepherds have to watch their animals carefully; the right balance of eating, drinking, and resting is essential.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Shepherds Protect Their Sheep**

Shepherds were also called to protect their sheep. As is still the case today, wild animals were a common threat to flocks; unlike today, predators could not be driven off by rifles from afar. Describing the valiant protection he provided to his father’s flock David says to King Saul in 1 Sam 17:34-35, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s

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44. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 54.

45. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 54-55.

sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.” However, wild animals were not the only threats that shepherds had to protect their flocks from; shepherds had to be vigilant against thieves who might come and steal their flocks for themselves.<sup>46</sup> Sheep also needed protection from the environment itself, because it was easy for them to wonder off and get lost.<sup>47</sup>

### Biblical Shepherds

Because ancient shepherds would feed, guide, and protect their flocks, shepherding proved a common image for leaders of God’s people literally and figuratively. Many biblical leaders also served as actual shepherds. The father of the Hebrew people, Abraham,<sup>48</sup> was a shepherd, and his descendants continued to keep flocks. Moses spent forty years as a shepherd<sup>49</sup> before leading God’s people out of Egypt. Before he served as one of Israel’s greatest kings, David was a shepherd who watched over his father’s flocks.<sup>50</sup> The prophet Amos was first a shepherd in Tekoa.<sup>51</sup>

These shepherds who served as political and spiritual leaders of God’s people no doubt laid the foundation for the figurative use of shepherd as a godly leader. Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd.<sup>52</sup> Following his resurrection Jesus calls on Peter to serve as a shepherd to his flock.<sup>53</sup> But perhaps the greatest metaphoric use of shepherd imagery is that of God the Father himself in Ps 23, which begins, “The LORD is my

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46. John 10:1.

47. Luke 15:4.

48. Gen 13:2.

49. Exod 3:1.

50. 1 Sam 16:11, 19.

51. Amos 1:1.

52. John 10:11.

53. John 21:15.



shepherd.” In Ps 23 God is shown providing both food and water for his flock, as David writes: “I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.” David describes God as guiding him to places of rest and through places of great danger and darkness, protecting him along the way, even in the presence of his enemies.

### Pastors as Shepherds

All of this background serves as a foundation for Peter’s calls to the leaders of the church to be shepherds, to be pastors of God’s flock, to feed and guide and protect them. Pastors are being called to feed God’s flock, to preach and teach them about the Word of God. To make sure that they understand what God has to say about the fallenness of humanity and how it affects our relationships with God and others. To understand what God has to say about grief, about anger, about fear, about worry, about the relationship between husbands and wives. These are ideas and issues that are foundational to pastoral counseling, and they are part of feeding God’s flock, because as Jesus said in Matt 4:4, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

As shepherds of God’s flock, pastors are also called to guide their flocks. They must “clarify direction and beliefs for the flock . . . set goals, make decisions, give direction, correct failures, affect change, and motivate people.”<sup>54</sup> This is true for a pastor’s work with the church as a whole, and especially in pastoral counseling. In a battle with cancer, following a suicide attempt, or even during a time of great worry over what will happen with this year’s harvest, parishioners often look to their pastor for help

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54. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 26.

and guidance. That does not mean that we as pastors have all the answers. Rather, our parishioners trust us as pastors to have a vision and understanding about how to walk alongside them during their time of distress and guide them into the presence God, the great shepherd, who does fully understand.

As shepherds of God's flock, pastors are called to protect their flocks. As Paul says in Acts 20:28-30, part of this may involve protecting them from false teachings.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

Pastors may not realize it, but this idea is vital not just in terms of doctrine but pastoral counseling as well. Consider this: a pastoral counselor may give very different advice to a married couple at odds or a teen struggling with his or her sexuality than is presented by the secular worldview represented on television and the Internet.<sup>55</sup> But it is not just outside threats from which a pastor may be called to protect his flock. "Protecting the flock also includes seeking lost, straying sheep—a critical aspect of shepherding many church shepherds totally neglect."<sup>56</sup> A pastor may need to step in and speak to the parishioners whose addictions seem to keep them away from church, or the families whose argument over a combine that stopped working a month after it was sold is threatening to divide the church. Sometimes a pastor must protect the flock from the sin inside itself.

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55. Even though secular counselors are not often present in rural communities, the ideas they represent are often presented in full force through other media.

56. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 18.

Peter calls upon church leaders to shepherd their flocks by serving as pastors who feed, guide, and protect the people of God. These things do not happen only from the pulpit; they happen through pastoral counseling as well.

### **Not Because . . . But Because**

In 1 Pet 5:2-3, the apostle urges pastors to serve “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

It is one thing to read about God’s call to serve as pastors who feed, guide, and protect the people of the church. On paper it makes sense. On paper it resonates with pastors’ caring hearts. On paper it may even seem like an easy thing to implement. But for rural pastors living out this call amid all of the responsibilities and pressures of ministry, the call to serve as a pastoral counselor in addition to serving as a preacher, a board member, a Sunday school teacher, the church maintenance man, the song leader and more, can be a difficult. The call to serve as pastoral counselors may be one of the most challenging calls they face, and because of that Peter’s words about how we approach this call to be godly shepherds are especially important.

Peter presents three “not . . . but” statements, each of which contrasts a problematic attitude toward our call with a godly one. Each of these will be explored and applied with respect to the ministry of the rural pastoral counselor.

## Not Because You Must, But Because You Are Willing

Peter encourages church leaders to pastor their churches “not because you must, but because you are willing.” It is interesting to see the way different translations capture Peter’s insights into the difficulty of leading the church. The New International Version says “not because you must,” the New American Standard Bible says “not under compulsion,” the King James Version translates it “not by constraint,” and the New English Translation says “not merely as a duty.” All of these translations are different ways of talking about the burden of leadership that comes with pastoring a congregation. Even thousands of years ago, while the church was in its infancy, there were those who felt pushed into leadership, as though it was something they had to do, or it was their duty to God. The term Peter uses in 1 Pet 5 is the same term for compulsion that Paul uses in 2 Cor 9:7: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” In this case, Peter is not talking about giving financially but of leaders giving of themselves.

And for these leaders who would face long hours and be central objects of harassment when persecution broke out against the church,<sup>57</sup> Peter understood that serving because they thought they had to would not be sufficient. Rather, God wants leaders who are willing to shepherd the flock, who do it because they love it and not because they have to. As E. G. Selwyn says, “There is all the difference, especially in spiritual matters, between the man who does his work for no other reason than he has to do it, and the man who does it willingly, as being in service to God.”<sup>58</sup>

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57. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 234.

58. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Saint Peter*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 230, as referenced by Scot McKnight, *1 Peter: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 261.

Peter's words here for pastors are foundational when talking about pastoral counseling in a rural context. Many pastors enter into ministry with a passion to preach the Word, thinking that teaching and preaching will be the cornerstone of their ministry in the local church. Then they enter into ministry and find that the flock of God does not just need to be fed, but needs to be cared for. They find themselves ministering among people in need of pastoral counseling, people who cannot go elsewhere, people who have substantial needs, and people who pastors do not feel adequately prepared to minister to. When that happens to pastors, pastoral counseling can quickly become something they feel like they are forced to do. It can feel confining, like an obligation they are bound to, that they are will do, but begrudgingly. In that moment Peter's word reminds pastors that God is looking for people who are willing to respond to his call to feed, guide, and protect the people of God. If pastors feel forced to do these things, if they feel pressured into them by God or their churches, no one will benefit. Rather, God desires for pastors to have hearts that are willing to, and eager to, care for his flock which has been entrusted into our care, because we love him and we love them.

### Not Greedy for Money, But Eager to Serve

Peter encourages church leaders to be "not greedy for money, but eager to serve." Comments like those of Paul in 1 Cor 9:12, "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?" seem to indicate that certain church leaders were paid in order that they could devote themselves more fully to ministry.<sup>59</sup> However, there were also many false teachers during the time of the early

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59. According to 1 Cor 9:12, Paul chose not to exercise this right for himself, although he understood he had the right to.

church that saw gathering a flock as a means for financial gain. Peter condemns such practices in 2 Pet 2:14-15: “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.”

In contrast to these false teachers, Peter writes that the leaders of the church should not be eager for money but eager to serve. In fact, the term Peter uses to talk of the eagerness was “often used in secular writing to characterize the benefactor of a city who enthusiastically provides time and money for civic duties.”<sup>60</sup> For Peter, pastors should not be eager to get but eager to give of themselves to the flock.

When many pastors, especially rural ones, read Peter’s words of caution they are likely to find themselves thinking, “Ha! What money?” Pastors serving in smaller rural churches are not likely to bring in excessive salaries, and their churches are unlikely to be able to afford them. However, Peter’s words affect the rural pastoral counselor in a unique way.

When it is a Thursday night and you would rather be at home with the family, but Jess and Chris have asked with you to meet with them about some conflict in their marriage and they show up twenty minutes late, you are likely to be frustrated. And when they come in already arguing about his mother, the church pianist, and as you struggle to get in a word edgewise for the next half hour, you feel they came to you more to act as a referee than to help them understand their marriage. You may wish you had taken that elective in seminary on counseling marital conflict. Just when you are starting to make some headway, they stop you and tell you they have to leave because they need to be

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60. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 305.

back in town at eight and they cannot be late. You may find these words floating through your mind: “I don’t get paid enough for this stuff.” In that moment Peter’s words remind us that we do not serve because we think it will make us rich or even pay all the bills. Instead, God wants pastors who will shepherd their flocks eagerly as a way to give back to them and give to God. Most of us know and say we are not in it for the money, but sometimes when faced with the hardships and frustration of pastoral ministry in a rural context, it is good to have a reminder.

#### Not Lording It Over Those Entrusted to You, But Being Examples to the Flock

Peter encourages church leaders to pastor their churches “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” Jesus spoke similar words to Peter and the other disciples which are recorded in Mark 10:42-45:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Peter now shares a similar reminder with those who pastor in the local church. He reminds them that they have a position of authority as leaders in the church, but they are to respond to it differently from nonbelievers, who “use their authority to rule over others and advance their own interests.”<sup>61</sup> Instead of commanding and demanding actions from those within their church, pastors are to follow Christ, the good shepherd, who led his flock by example rather than mandate, who came to serve.

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61. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 235.

This idea applies to pastoral counseling in a rural context in two important ways: how pastors offer counsel and how they view the call to counsel. When that man knocks on the frame of your office door with his head hung low because he has fallen off the wagon again (which you know because of the call from his wife last night), it can be tempting to call him into your office and rebuke him with all of the authority you can muster. “Again, Jim? How could you do this? Haven’t we talked about this before? Jim, how many times are you going to this? Jim, it’s not right. And it’s not just me talking. God says it’s not right for you and for your family. It has to stop. You have to stop it.” Those words may come out of our frustration with him as well as our frustration that after countless talks about the issue, it has come up again. And in frustration we bring to bear all the authority we can muster; we lord it over him in hopes that somehow we can force him, convince him, browbeat him into changing.

But the hard truth is that in such a situation you are not telling Jim anything he has not heard before, anything he has not told himself, anything that he did not tell himself before walking into your office. We cannot make him stop; we would like to be able to command it, for his best interest, but we cannot. Telling him to stop over and over, trying to use our authority and that of God’s law is likely to cause him to beat himself up even more. But there is another way. We have an opportunity to serve as an example to Jim, an example of grace and love and hope. We can show him grace and compassion and help turn him to God, who has not only grace to offer but also the strength to help Jim in a way that we, and the law, cannot. How we talk to those we counsel will reflect how they talk to themselves, how they see themselves. We have to choose whether we are going to lord it over them, or to try and make them change with



the force of our will and the power of the law, or set an example that points them to the Lord who can help bring that change about in their hearts.

This command can also influence the way that pastors see pastoral counseling. Many of the things pastors are called to do, like preaching, leading meetings, and even teaching Sunday school, are visible positions of authority within the church. When filling these roles, pastors are seen and acknowledged as a leader within the church. Pastoral counseling is often different. The work a pastor does in counseling a grieving widow is done privately during the week where no one will see or know about it but the widow and God. While pastors are counseling and providing care, many congregants may think that they are sitting in their office while the congregants do real work out in the field. In those situations a pastor cannot respond by saying, “Do you have any idea the grief that Flo has been going through these past few months? The hours I’ve spent with her in the Word and in prayer together?” And yet Peter’s words remind pastors that what we are called to is not a position of authority that people will see and praise us for, but that of a shepherd faithfully serving the flock.

### **When the Chief Shepherd Appears**

Having served as a leader in the church himself for many years, Peter understands that the words he has spoken are not only challenging but also that they bring with them a great weight of responsibility. In a few short sentences he has called leaders to serve as shepherds to their congregations. He has charged them to do so gladly and willingly. He has reminded them that they do not shepherd because the pay is good. He has called them to lead with the authority of one who serves. These are words that continue to challenge

the most seasoned of pastors even today. And so, as this section of his letter draws to a close, Peter seeks to encourage pastors as well, reminding them that they are not alone in their service and, while they may not see it in this life, one day they will be rewarded greatly for their efforts. In 1 Pet 5:4 he writes, “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

### The Chief Shepherd

Peter looks forward to the return of Christ and in doing so refers to him as the Chief Shepherd. He has already alluded to the idea of Christ as the Chief Shepherd in verse 2 when he calls pastors to “be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care.” It is a reminder to pastors that their flock, the church that they lead, does not belong to them. The people belong to God, who has entrusted them into a pastor’s care. This use of undershepherds was a common practice in the ancient Near East; those with larger flocks would hire, or use family members,<sup>62</sup> as undershepherds to watch over portions of their flock.<sup>63</sup> It is an idea that Peter utilizes here to remind church leaders that while they are to be shepherds over their flocks, they are not the chief shepherds but undershepherds who ultimately serve Jesus Christ himself.

This can serve as both a challenge and encouragement to pastors. It is a challenge in that they are reminded that God is watching over them and will hold them accountable for the sheep that have been placed into their care. As God says in Ezek 34:2-6,

Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You

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62. Laban used his son-in-law Jacob to watch over part of his flocks.

63. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 53.

have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

It is a reminder to pastors that God is watching over their work as undershepherds and will hold them accountable.

I think this reminder of accountability is especially applicable for verses like 1 Pet 5:2-3. But I believe that Peter's words can also be an encouragement for pastors, especially rural ones. For in reminding pastors that Christ is their Chief Shepherd, he also reminds them that they are not alone. Many pastors in rural ministry feel alone. When they face a difficult situation with church leaders or in pastoral counseling, they cannot walk into the office of another pastor on staff and say, "How would you handle a situation where a farmer is filled with guilt because the only way his farm can survive is by buying up land which is available because his friend's farm is about to go under?" Times like those can be overwhelming and discouraging for rural pastors because they feel like they face them all alone. And yet Peter's words remind them that they are not. They are undershepherds, and as they watch over the flock entrusted to their care they have a chief shepherd watching over them who is able to come alongside them and offer strength and support.

### A Crown of Glory

Peter also encourages church leaders by reminding them that their work will not go unnoticed or unrewarded. He concludes verse 4 by saying "you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." When Christ returns, church leaders will receive a

crown of glory. Readers should not confuse the term *crown* here with the golden, jewel-encrusted headdresses often worn by royalty in movies and on television. In Peter's context crowns referred to leafy crowns often awarded in the Greco-Roman world after athletic victories or military conquests.<sup>64</sup> Also, Peter says that the crown pastors will receive will not be made of laurel leaves or even gold; it will be composed of the glory of Christ himself. When Christ returns, those who have served him as church leaders, elders, and pastors will be honored and recognized with a crown of glory that will never fade.

It is an important encouragement to rural pastors who may spend years investing in and nurturing a church of twenty-five, wondering if they are making a difference, who feel marginalized while checking Facebook and seeing that their friend from seminary has taken a job in a church of twenty-five hundred. It is encouraging for rural pastors to know that the hours they spend in prayer, in counseling, or sitting in the home of an eighty-three-year-old widow reminiscing about her husband who passed away fifteen years prior, matter to God. Their care for God's flock is something God sees, supports, and will one day reward. Even if only a handful of people in this life understand their service and sacrifice, one day all of heaven will celebrate it alongside of them for all eternity.

### **Pastors as Shepherds**

In 1 Pet 5, Peter exhorts church leaders to be shepherds, to pastor the people of God. This call harkens back to the rich biblical and cultural imagery of shepherds as those who feed, protect, and guide their flocks. It is a reminder that pastoral ministry is about more than preaching the Word on Sunday but involves daily comfort and care for

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64. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 236.

the people of God. Also, this pastoral counseling and care is something that pastors should embrace willingly, without intentions of striking it rich, and with a heart of service. It is also a task that rural pastors do not face alone, for they are but undershepherds who serve the Chief Shepherd, Christ. He will strengthen and support them and, one day, reward them for their care for his flock. Through this theological foundation it is clear that pastoral counseling and care is central to what it means to be a pastor, or shepherd, of God's flock. Pastoral counseling and care is not option or something pastors should get around to if they get the chance. It is something that pastors are to embrace as part of their call.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Potential Resources**

Through a study of 1 Peter 5 it has been shown that pastoral counseling and care is as foundational a part of being a pastor as preaching and teaching. Also, the research outlined in chapter 2 shows that a minority of pastors, 42.1%, feel good or excellent about how prepared they are for the pastoral counseling challenges they face in ministry (the rest feel average or below). When pastors are faced with this discrepancy between what they have been called to do by God and what they feel equipped to do in ministry, it seems logical that they would look for help in the Scriptures, from friends in ministry, and literature. Literature is one of the best and also most daunting options because of the sheer breadth of options available to pastors. Therefore it will prove helpful to review some of some of those books that pastors might look to, or might not think to look to, when seeking guidance. Because few, if any, books specifically address pastoral counseling in the rural church, I will look at three different categories of resources that speak to the issue in their own way: counseling books, rural ministry books, and books focused on pastoral care. For this survey, counseling books are those geared toward counselors in more clinical settings; rural ministry books are those written specifically with rural ministers in mind; and books on pastoral care focus on equipping pastors to provide spiritual care during difficult situations.

## Counseling Books

When many pastors think of counseling books the *DSM-5* comes to mind. It is the big, thick, expensive, and official-looking book that they were likely exposed to in their seminary counseling course, if they had one. They may have had to buy it, or more likely were made aware of its existence as the standardized reference book for most counselors. Because of its prominence, it is likely to be one of the first counseling resources that comes to mind if pastors need help with a counseling situation.

*DSM* stands for *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and the five refers to the fact that it is the fifth edition of the manual.<sup>1</sup> It is important for pastors to understand two things about the *DSM-5*. First, even if they were exposed to it in a counseling class at seminary it was because it is a foundational resource used in the health care industry, not because it has Christian foundations. Second, while the *DSM-5* is a resource often associated with counseling, it is not intended to aid one in offering care. Instead, the *DSM-5* is intended to provide standardized definitions and classifications of mental health issues from acute stress disorder to vascular neurocognitive disorder in order to help health professionals such as “psychiatrists and other physicians, psychologists, social workers, nurses, occupational and rehabilitation therapists,”<sup>2</sup> counselors, and even pastors to provide accurate, standardized, diagnoses. This means that the *DSM-5* is written to help diagnose disorders, not offer care.

For pastors who choose to utilize the *DSM-5* it will be helpful to understand how the book is set up to keep from getting lost in the sea of information it provides. The *DSM-5* is broken up into chapters based on specific disorders such as anxiety disorders,

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1. Published in 2013.

2. American Psychiatric Association, “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), accessed September 2, 2016, <http://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>.

depressive disorders, and sleep-wake disorders.<sup>3</sup> Pastors will find that each chapter is then broken up into small sections addressing different forms of that particular disorder. For example, the chapter in the *DSM-5* on anxiety disorders has sections addressing separation anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and more. In perusing these sections addressing specific disorders, the first thing a reader will encounter is the name of the disorder with a number beneath it. This is the classification code for the specific disorder; this code is used by health care professionals for disorder classification, reports, and billing purposes. It is something most pastors will not need to worry about. Also at the beginning of each entry is something the *DSM-5* refers to as the diagnostic criteria; this is a list of the symptoms that will arise in a person's life as a result of particular disorder that can be used to verify a diagnosis. Following this is the descriptive text which provides additional information about the disorder such as prevalence, gender-related diagnostic issues, and differential diagnosis or how this particular disorder varies from other similar ones.

Most pastors, save those with counseling backgrounds or training, will not utilize the *DSM-5* to diagnose struggling parishioners. However, they might utilize it to understand a person with an existing diagnosis from a trained professional, so that if someone in their congregation has agoraphobia they might better understand what that means and looks like in the person's life.<sup>4</sup> However, even here using the *DSM-5* can be difficult for pastors because it changes and is revised from one edition to another. For instance, a pastor with congregant who says he or she was diagnosed with Asperger's as a

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3. Because this is the standard work for the field, pastors will find that many other counseling resources are organized in a similar way.

4. However, pastors must also keep in mind the world of difference between a parishioner who was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and one who self-diagnosed because they like pictures in their home to be straight on the wall.



child will not find any information in the *DSM-5* because in the recently published fifth edition Asperger's has been reclassified as part of the autism spectrum.

The industry-wide acceptance of the *DSM-5* may lead some pastors to still feel that they need a copy for themselves, but because of the complexity outlined above an unfamiliar pastor trying use the *DSM-5* would be similar to laypersons in the church trying to use a Greek commentary in their study of Romans. There is good information there, but they are unlikely comprehend or understand most of it and would be served just as well with other resources more suited to their needs. If a pastor does feel the need to get a copy of the *DSM-5*, I would suggest looking into two other resources that might prove beneficial. First, pastors who want to use the *DSM-5* might buy Hunter's *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*. This dictionary will provide explanations of many of the unfamiliar terms and ideas pastors will encounter in the *DSM-5*.<sup>5</sup> The second resource pastors may want to pursue is the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5*. This reference guide offers the pertinent disorder diagnostic criteria in more concise form, and at a reduced cost as well.

For pastors wary of the *DSM-5* I would suggest Collins's *Christian Counseling*. It is like the *DSM-5* in that it is a large counseling book that addresses a wide array of disorders. Unlike the *DSM-5*, which is designed to allow health care professionals to provide an accurate diagnosis, *Christian Counseling* is "written to assist counselors, pastors, church leaders, students, and other Christians in one important aspect of the

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5. This work does not simply provide definition for theological terms; it also has entries that provide insight on the history of pastoral care, pastoral care in different faith traditions, and even courses of care of persons such as missionaries. Despite its breadth of information it is still best utilized as a reference work rather than a primary resource.

church's work: burden bearing.”<sup>6</sup> This points to three key differences between *Christian Counseling* and the *DSM-5*. One, *Christian Counseling* is written from a biblical worldview, a fact that is made clear as the entry on each disorder has a section on the presenting issue and the Bible. Two, the goal of *Christian Counseling* is not so much diagnosis but care. And three, *Christian Counseling* may be used by those who practice professional counseling, but it is also geared toward nonprofessionals in a way that the *DSM-5* is not.

When pastors open *Christian Counseling* their first instinct may be to quickly turn to the section on the issue they hope to counsel. However, before that time arrives I would recommend that pastors take the time to read through the first seven chapters of the book. These provide a basic introduction to counseling, addressing issues from the difference between counseling and visiting<sup>7</sup> to issues of confidentiality.<sup>8</sup> For those pastors who took an introductory course on counseling in school these chapters will provide a basic refresher, and for those who did not it will provide a valuable introduction that will help prepare them for the challenges they face as pastoral counselors in a rural context.

Most pastors will use *Christian Counseling* for help addressing specific issues. When looking for information on an issue, such as anxiety, pastors will note that unlike the *DSM-5*, which presents and addresses a diverse subset of types of anxiety from panic disorders to agoraphobia, *Christian Counseling* provides general information on the disorder rather than breaking it into subsets. Each chapter begins with a brief case study to help pastors understand how the disorder might present itself in their ministry. This is

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6. Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, rev. ed. (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 21.

7. Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 23.

8. Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 89.

followed by a generalized introduction to the issue as well as a section looking at how the Bible addresses the issue. “Then comes a survey of causes, effects, counseling recommendations, and suggestions for preventing each problem.”<sup>9</sup> Collins also provides a quick reference guide at the end of each chapter which may prove helpful for pastors who need immediate help with an issue.

When utilizing *Christian Counseling* it is important for rural pastors to understand that this work is used by a wide array of persons from professional counselors to pastors to church leaders. Because of this, the recommended courses of care vary widely as well, and some courses may be beyond a pastor’s level of competency. For instance, when counseling those with anxiety, Collins emphasizes the importance of showing love as well as the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral interventions.<sup>10</sup> Showing intentional love is something most pastors will feel comfortable doing, while cognitive behavioral intervention may leave them thinking “What in the world is that?” When they look it up in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* they may wonder “How in the world am I supposed to do that?” Not all courses of action in the book will be possible or should be attempted by pastors in a rural context.

Along those lines, it also became apparent to me that many of the courses of care recommended in *Christian Counseling* are best handled through regular, structured counseling sessions. This makes sense for professional counselors and those counseling in urban or suburban settings where counseling is more widely accepted. However, due to the rural mindset, parishioners may be wary of meeting with pastors regularly. They may feel that talking about an issue once was enough for them, and they may not want to talk

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9. Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 3rd ed., xiii.

10. Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 3rd ed., 150-52.

about it again. Or, even if they were willing, they may not be available regularly in times of harvest or when they are out at the ranch for a month. Because of this rural pastors will likely need to pick and choose what is beneficial for them as they work through *Christian Counseling* and adapt some of the ideas for use in more informal interactions. For pastors looking for more information on how to specifically minister to those with a rural mindset, I would suggest looking at the information provided on books focusing on rural ministry.

If pastors feel overwhelmed by the size of a reference work like the *DSM-5* and *Christian Counseling* I would recommend Johnson's *The Minister's Guide to Psychological Disorders and Treatments*. One might think of this work as a combination of *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* and *Christian Counseling*. Like *Christian Counseling*, it is written with a Christian worldview, is designed for pastoral use, and provides information on disorders as well as on potential care. Like the *DSM-5*, it addresses a wide range of specific issues, so instead of anxiety it lists anxiety disorders such as specific phobias, panic disorders, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder.<sup>11</sup> Like the *Desk Reference*, it does so in a clear and concise way. With this more clinical bent *The Minister's Guide* also includes helpful insight for pastors on things like the difference between PsyDs, DOs, and MAs,<sup>12</sup> as well as insight on the medications these professionals might prescribe for a disorder and what they do.

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11. W. Brad Johnson, *The Minister's Guide to Psychological Disorders and Treatments*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 56-62.

12. Johnson, *Minister's Guide to Psychological Disorders and Treatments*, 178-79. PsyDs are clinical psychologists, DOs are psychiatrists, and MAs are counselors.

However, *The Minister's Guide to Psychological Disorders and Treatments* also brings to the forefront an issue that many rural pastors struggle with: referral. Johnson's work provides an honest look at the disorders pastors may be asked to counsel and truth that while some things, like basic anxiety and grief, can readily be addressed between a parishioner and pastor; issues like alcoholism, bulimia, and post-traumatic stress disorder cannot. In these cases he strongly recommends pastors refer their congregants to a professional counselor. Johnson also provides an excellent in-depth guide on the referral process in order to put pastors at ease and help them find confidence in the difficult task of entrusting their people into another's care.

Unfortunately, the practice of referral is not always possible in rural contexts. For congregants in a rural context, their independent nature can make it very difficult to approach a pastor about an issue, and the idea of talking to someone else, especially a psychologist or counselor, may be almost unthinkable. They may be able to justify to themselves talking to a pastor, telling themselves that it is about spiritual care, but to talk to a health professional about a mental disorder is something else entirely. This attitude serves as a barrier to referral in rural contexts. Another problem with referral is that pastors are free, while health care professionals are not. Seeking additional help usually costs additional money, and for many with a rural mindset that sort of mental work does not justify the cost. In fact, studies have shown that for many the cost and lack of insurance is a major barrier in seeking mental health care.<sup>13</sup> And even if rural persons were willing to accept a referral, and even if cost was not an issue, pastors would still need to find a health care professional to refer their parishioners to. This can lead to a

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13. Megan Oettinger, "The Decision and Rewards of Practicing Psychology in a Rural Area" (PhD diss., Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 2008), 13.

struggle in the hearts of rural pastors. They want to provide proper care but those books on proper care seems to point them again and again to the need to refer their members to someone more qualified than them, which the parishioners in their care may not be comfortable with. This is where books on offering pastoral care can be beneficial for pastors as they look at the unique ways pastors can care to those in their congregation, even if the pastor is not a mental health professional.

### **Rural Ministry Books**

For the pastor engaged in counseling in a rural context it is important to understand the struggles that their members face. In this respect books on counseling are a vital resource that can help guide pastors to both Scriptures and courses of action. However, as has been noted, many of the resources written on pastoral counseling are written with the urban mindset in mind, even if unintentionally, and things like referrals, treatment services, or even regular weekly counseling sessions may not be possible. Therefore it may be helpful for pastors in a rural context to engage with some works that are geared more toward their ministry, books that focus specifically on pastoral care in a rural context. In reaching for just such a book, most rural pastors will come to a difficult realization: while there are thousands of books available on counseling and pastoral care, very few look at these issues from a rural context. I would like to suggest two books that do address this need directly and a couple that do so in a more tangential way.

The first book that pastors may want to look to for help with pastoral care in a rural church is Killen's *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*. This was one of the first books recommended to me as a pastor in my ministry context and one that helped

me understand that pastoral care in my rural church was different from the suburban church I grew up in. But before looking at this book, an issue of vocabulary should be addressed. This book is titled *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, not *Pastoral Care in the Rural Church*. The truth is that because so many people understand rural in so many different ways, books that would be aptly suited for pastors in rural ministry do not always have “rural” in the title. Books may talk about rural churches, country churches, town and country churches, or small churches using the terms synonymously. However, that is not always the case. Pastors should be aware that there are also many “small church” books that are great for pastors in a small suburban churches but will not meet the need of pastors in rural context. *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church* is not one of those books; the small church Killen speaks to is very much the small rural church.

As Killen shares about his first pastorate where choir practice was held at “dark thirty”<sup>14</sup> and he reminds readers that “the first step in offering pastoral care is moving into relationship with others”<sup>15</sup> it is clear that this book is written to help pastors understand and minister to those with a rural mindset. Because the author recognizes that “In small churches, counseling is more likely to happen informally, while you are sitting with a church member on a front porch or in a hospital waiting room or at a table in the local coffee shop”<sup>16</sup> he takes more established counseling ideas like active listening<sup>17</sup> or the stages of grief<sup>18</sup> and helps readers understand how they would be applied in rural

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14. James L. Killen Jr., *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), vii.

15. Killen, *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, 5.

16. Killen, *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, 11.

17. Killen, *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, 15.

18. Killen, *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, 41-43.

pastoral ministry. For this reason *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church* is an essential resource for pastors trying to understand how to counsel in a rural context.

Killen's book lays an excellent foundation, but it is also a generalized one. As the title suggests, Killen's book focuses on pastoral care rather than pastoral counseling. He focuses primarily on building relationships, visitation, care for the sick, and ministry to the dying and those who have lost loved ones. There are brief chapters on helping families in conflict and pastoral counseling, but these chapters will leave the reader wanting more rather than feeling equipped. Pastors looking for specific help in addressing alcoholism, domestic violence, or adultery in a rural context will need to utilize other resources. To his credit, Killen recognizes this shortcoming; he ends his chapter on pastoral counseling by writing, "I hope you understand how inadequate this treatment of the subject of pastoral counseling has been. Keep on learning."<sup>19</sup>

Another book on pastoral care in a rural context is Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall's *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*. In the first half of the book, the authors establish four foundational issues<sup>20</sup> in terms of the rural ministry; one might think of it as their own version of the rural mindset. The values are the land—understanding the unique connection between rural parishioners and the land, including both its history and their dependence on it; community—understanding the blessing and drawbacks of interwoven rural communities; leadership—both the expectations that pastors inherit within the rural church and the community at large; and diversity—taking an honest look at the changing nature of rural America. The second half of the book looks

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19. Killen, *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*, 73.

20. Jeanne M. Hoeft, L Shannon Jung, and Joretta L. Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 14-15.



at how this rural mindset affects pressing rural issues such as poverty, domestic violence, and health care struggles in rural America.

While this focus on the distinctive nature and struggles of rural America is welcome, the greatest strength of the book is the case studies presented. Each major chapter, those on foundational and pressing issues in rural ministry, opens with a case study that is explored throughout the chapter in terms of how it relates to pastoral care in rural communities. These are not simple, whitewashed case studies but ones that reflect the intricate and complex nature of rural ministry. For instance, the chapter on community opens with the case of the death of a local football player in an auto accident following a party celebrating the end of the season and its impact on parents who wanted their child to grow up in a safe, sheltered place; the way that rumors of drunk driving filter through the community; the way the football coach struggles with his responsibility; and the way that all of these people come to the one pastor in town as the pastor tries to comfort them and guide the community through the grieving process with no real counseling resources available.<sup>21</sup> Reading through the case study it was clear that the authors had experience in rural ministry. Working through each chapter's case study did an excellent job of bringing the realities of pastoral care in a rural context to life and will encourage readers to dwell on what it means for them to offer pastoral care in their context. Since the authors work through cases, they do not attempt to provide as much direct advice beyond the particular case they are addressing, in contrast to the direct advice found in *Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church*. However, the authors encourage readers to understand that "care is context specific, yet practices and principles

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21. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 45-46.

are often appropriate across contexts.”<sup>22</sup> While their struggles may not match the ones in the book, in following along with the case studies pastors will glean truths applicable to their own context.

As pastors contemplate engaging *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, they should be aware of the context it was written in. This book is authored by three seminary professors with Methodist backgrounds. The authors note that they partnered with Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches<sup>23</sup> in writing the book, and in general it is appropriate for pastors from a wide array of denominations. However, I believe there are few small moments when a particular leaning comes through. For instance, in speaking about community the authors state that “pastoral leaders are always outsiders in rural settings.”<sup>24</sup> I suspect this understanding may come from the rotating basis of Methodist calls which would lead to outsider status, but outsider status is not always valid, especially in long-term rural ministry. The other part of the context that pastors should be aware of is that this book is written by three seminary professors, and while they all have experience in rural ministry that shines through in the book, there are also times when their academic background comes through. For example, while exploring the importance of land in rural context, the author addresses British geographer Keith Halfacree’s threefold approach to thinking about the aspects of a place<sup>25</sup> as well as “postmodern place narratives.”<sup>26</sup> These are not bad things in themselves, but I suspect that rural pastors might be caught off guard by the

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22. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 3.

23. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 13.

24. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 50.

25. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 23.

26. Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 33.

juxtaposition of concrete practical insight on rural ministry, which they identify with, and postmodern analysis of it, which they may not.

*Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church* and *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* represent the best of the limited options available for pastors seeking insight into pastoral counseling within a rural context. However, because so few resources are available, I thought it would be appropriate to recommend two other works that might provide additional insight into ministry in a rural context. The first is *Open Secrets* by Richard Lischer; the author looks back on his first years of ministry in a small church in rural Illinois. The book's title refers to the unique rural mindset and how most everyone in rural community can know about a problem, in this case young girl's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and yet no one wants to talk about it. One might think of *Open Secrets* as one long case study in which the author comes to understand the rural mindset and learns about the difficulties of pastoral care in a rural community through firsthand encounters with sickness, death, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. While the author does not provide direct advice or outline general principles, the pastor ministering in a rural context pastors will still find much to reflect on and may find it cathartic, as I did, to read through this memoir and realize "I'm not the only one who made that mistake" and "I'm not the only one who has struggled with this."

The second book I would recommend was referenced in chapter 1, *Leading Through Change*, which was foundational in establishing the guidelines for the rural mindset. This is not a book on pastoral counseling or even pastoral care; there is nothing on anxiety, depression, or grief in its pages. However, it is a book about change, specifically about understanding rural people's approach to change: how they see it, its

complexities in their lives, and walking them through it. Whether a pastor is leading a rural church through change, or an individual parishioner through a time of change, those aspects of the rural mindset and change are going to be important to understand. For that reason I would recommend pastoral counselors look into *Leading Through Change*<sup>27</sup> even if it is not a traditional pastoral counseling book.

Reading through these books one quickly sees that the rural mindset shines through. Rather than books with lists and diagnoses and bullet-pointed treatment options, one finds stories and personal accounts of real-life pastoral ministry. However, pastors should note that this information is often anecdotal rather than exhaustively researched and standardized. Also, it tends to be generalized rather than offering specific forms of action within the rural context. For this reason, rural pastors would be best suited to pair these works with a book like *Christian Counseling* rather than rely on rural ministry books alone.

### **Pastoral Care Books**

There is one final set of books that a rural pastor might look to for help as pastoral counselors, and those are books focusing on pastoral care. Rural ministry books seek to equip pastors to minister in a rural context, counseling books seek to equip pastors to address specific disorders from a psychological standpoint, but it is pastoral care books that seek to equip pastors to do something that is distinctly Christian, to care for the souls of the hurting people who walk through their doors.

For pastors who feel inundated when they think about pastoral counseling, whether due to lack of equipping or lack of experience, Haugk's *Christian Caregiving* is

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27. Specifically the first five chapters, which address the present state of rural America.

a great place to start. Rather than beginning the book by focusing on what pastors need to do, Haugk spends the first half of the book establishing a foundation for pastoral care in a practical and understandable way. He does this first by assailing the underlying fear that many pastoral counselors, including myself, struggle with: the voice inside them that says “I’m going to screw this up.” This is a fear that can especially take root when pastors engage counseling books such as the *DSM-5* or even *Christian Counseling* and realize how little they know about the issues and struggles out here in the world. Haugk is quick to establish that pastors are caregivers but only God is the cure giver,<sup>28</sup> that success does not come solely through the efforts of the pastor or parishioner, and to place responsibility in human hands takes away from the work of God. That is not to say that Haugk discourages preparation, study, or care on the part of the pastor; instead, he shares this seeking to remove the burden from the shoulders of pastors who may erroneously feel that they have to know the answer to every question and do everything perfectly. “You are probably not a combined physician, business person, psychologist, teacher, farmer, provider of every need, all wrapped up into one.”<sup>29</sup> Along these same lines Haugk does a good job of establishing and encouraging pastors to embrace the unique spiritual dimension of pastoral care. Doctors may care for the body and psychologists for the mind, but the pastor has the unique privilege of caring for the soul.<sup>30</sup>

Haugk also provides some good basic information on pastoral counseling, such as listening, acceptance, and forgiveness. Pastors may find some of the information a bit simplistic, such as chapters on prayer and using the Bible, but these chapters serve as a

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21. 28. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Christian Caregiving, a Way of Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984),

29. Haugk, *Christian Caregiving, a Way of Life*, 21, 67.

30. Haugk, *Christian Caregiving, a Way of Life*, 52.

foundation for laypersons without the experience many pastors have. For those pastors who resonate with this book in a meaningful way, it should be noted that the author, Kenneth Haugk, is also the founder of Stephen Ministries, a nationally known parachurch organization that trains laypersons “to provide high-quality, confidential, Christ-centered care to people who are hurting.”<sup>31</sup> Rural pastors seeking deeper equipping for pastoral counseling might want to consider attending one of their workshops.

Another pastoral care book that may prove beneficial to pastors ministering in a rural context is Paul Tripp’s *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*. Both Tripp’s and Haugk’s books encourage pastors in the fact that “personal ministry is not about always knowing what to say, it is not about fixing everything in sight that is broken. Personal ministry is about connecting people with Christ.”<sup>32</sup> But there is a unique difference between the two. If one thinks of Haugk’s book as helping pastors embrace their competency in caring for others, Tripp’s book helps pastors embrace their unique position as pastors in offering care. Like myself, many pastors come out of seminary equipped to study and proclaim the Word of God but feeling ill-equipped as pastoral counselors. Tripp, however, encourages and provides a way for pastors to embrace their deep knowledge of the Word and to utilize it in pastoral care. In Tripp’s eyes, much of what pastors struggle to do in traditional counseling seeks to address horizontal problems, problems of this world from broken relationships to destructive patterns of living. However, at the heart of these problems are sin and a broken relationship with God. While pastors may not feel equipped to address the horizontal problem in people’s lives,

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31. Stephen Ministries, “What Is Stephen Ministries?”, accessed September 2, 2016, <https://www.stephenministries.org/stephenministry/default.cfm/917>.

32. Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 184.

a deep knowledge of Scripture does equip them to address the vertical issue of sin before God. This idea of the pastor's serving as a person who brings people into a vertical relationship with God rather than the one who fixes their horizontal problems with others was one I was first exposed to in Eugene Peterson's *The Pastor*,<sup>33</sup> but Tripp has taken this idea and expanded it to help pastors understand how this idea can be applied specifically in their pastoral counseling.

Tripp encourages pastors to do this by working through what he calls the Love-Know-Speak-Do model.<sup>34</sup> At its heart is the idea of knowing the love of God and sharing it with those we are ministering to, coming to know them and their situation on a deeper level, speaking the truth in love to them about what God has allowed us to see in their lives that they may not, and helping them do something with what they have learned. Of added interest to rural pastors, Tripp is clear that "this is not just an aspect of formal ministry in the local church, but a lifestyle to which God has called each of us."<sup>35</sup> Because Tripp established this as a relational model, more than a formal one to be practiced exclusively in established pastoral counseling sessions, it is easily adapted to ministry in a rural context.

However, pastors interested in Tripp's book should understand that he is a part of the biblical counseling movement, sometimes also referred to as nouthetic counseling. Espousing the sufficiency of Scripture, this group has at times been at odds with modern psychology and even Christian counseling. One can sense this tension and perhaps even a defensive attitude on Tripp's part in the opening quarter of the book as he takes subtle

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33. "My work is not to fix people. It is to lead people in worship of God and to lead them in living a holy life." Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 137.

34. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 109-12.

35. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 112.

and no-so-subtle shots at psychology,<sup>36</sup> systematic theology,<sup>37</sup> and topical use of the Bible.<sup>38</sup> I do not wish to comment on this conflict in this space, but I do think it is important for pastors to know that it is present. Pastors who may be unfamiliar with the debate can still gain much from the book if they are willing to move past the opening portion and are willing to dig deeper into what Tripp has to offer.

When thinking about pastoral care Haugk offers help on care and Tripp offers unique insight into a pastor's place, but there may still be pastors who find themselves looking for something that captures their pastoral care focus but offers more concrete practical advice. For pastors who want to know "What am I supposed to do when I get a call in the middle of the night to offer pastoral care to someone struggling with suicide, domestic violence, or adultery? What am I supposed to do then, in that moment?" I would recommend a final set of pastoral counseling books, Switzer's *The Minister as Crisis Counselor* and *Pastoral Care Emergencies*.

Like the other authors in this section, Switzer understands the unique call in pastoral counseling, that a pastor's unique relationship with those they care for opens up avenues for care and support that are inherently different from a professional counselor's,<sup>39</sup> allowing them to care and share the love of Christ with others.<sup>40</sup> However, Switzer's approach to these ideas is much more academic, and I do not feel that this is what rural pastors will find as the strength of his work. Rather, the most beneficial parts of these books are when Switzer, a pastor who also found himself unprepared to minister

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36. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 12.

37. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 24.

38. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 27.

39. David K. Switzer, *The Minister as Crisis Counselor*, rev. and enl. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986), 15.

40. David K. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 14.



to his rural community upon leaving seminary,<sup>41</sup> lays out how a pastor can best respond with pastoral care in the face of a crisis.

Switzer's first book, *The Minister as Crisis Counselor*, addresses what he feels is the most common way pastors are called to offer counsel and care: when the phone rings or someone shows up at church unannounced and in distress about an emergency that has arisen. These situational crises, as Switzer calls them, can be anything from the loss of a farm, to a runaway child, to a wife leaving her husband.<sup>42</sup> While Switzer understands that every situation is unique, he also helps pastors understand how they can be prepared to answer that call and begin the process of pastoral care when it bursts into their lives. To help pastors do this Switzer offers a basic outline for pastoral care triage. Pastors can begin by making *contact*, help congregants *focus* in on the present situation, and help them *cope* with what has happened and begin to form a response.<sup>43</sup> Not only does Switzer lay this out; he also goes into great depth on what it means and looks like to make contact, to aid a person in focusing, and to begin to help the person cope.

Switzer's follow-up book, *Pastoral Care Emergencies*, covers much of the same ground in less technical detail. This also allows the author to go beyond the initial call to address what pastoral care might look like in the emergency room or in response to domestic abuse, as well as an issue I wish I had been equipped to address when I started ministry—attempted suicide both in terms of the victim and the family. Both books are recommended for pastors, but as has already been alluded to, they are more technical in nature and would be best utilized by the pastor who resonates more with the counseling aspect of pastoral care.

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41. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies*, 2.

42. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies*, 36.

43. Switzer, *Minister as Crisis Counselor*, 65.

Books on pastoral care are a great resource for pastors ministering in a rural context, encouraging pastors to embrace their unique position as pastoral caregivers, as opposed to counselors or psychologists.

### **Literature Review Summary**

When faced with the difficulty of pastoral counseling, there are many different types of books pastors may turn to. This review has taken the often overwhelming flood of resources available and provided direction on a few of the specific types of books rural pastors may want to consult. Books on counseling will help pastors better understand the problems they face from a psychological perspective. Books on rural ministry will give pastors insight into ministering to those with a more rural mindset. Books on pastoral care will help pastors embrace their unique pastoral position as counselors. Utilizing these resources can give pastors confidence in an area of ministry that they often struggle with and hope that pastoral care is not something that is beyond them.

However, while each of these types of books captures a part of what it is like to be a pastoral counselor in rural ministry, few works seem to pull all of them together. Rural pastors would still need to consult a variety of sources when facing a difficult pastoral counseling situation rather than have one they can turn to. It is my hope that a pastoral guide to counseling in a rural context can help fill that void.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PROJECT OVERVIEW: A RURAL PASTOR'S GUIDE

#### **An Unmet Need in Rural America**

As was shown through a study of 1 Pet 5:1-4, rural pastors have been called by God to be undershepherds of his flock. This includes things many things that pastors expect to do, such as preaching, leading Sunday school classes, and overseeing church board meetings. However it also means providing pastoral care and serving as counselors for the hurting people in their flocks. To outsiders, and to many inexperienced pastors, this may seem like an easy task among the rolling fields and lowing flocks of a picturesque rural America. Unfortunately that picturesque rural America exists only in reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Pastors in rural America are in need of help. A study of rural pastors showed that rural America is not the quaint escape from the real world that so many believe. Issues like anger, depression, and alcoholism are common in the rural church. Almost half of the pastors surveyed had faced issues of suicide, drug addiction, and child abuse in the course of their ministry. With such great problems awaiting them in ministry, one would hope that pastors are being prepared to help address them in schooling, but 50 percent of pastors surveyed had two classes or fewer to help prepare them as pastoral counselors. And if those classes were anything like the ones I experienced, they were focused more on theoretical knowledge than preparing pastors for practical pastoral ministry. It is no surprise that 59.7 percent of the pastors surveyed rated their level of preparedness as pastoral counselors at average or less.

There is a need for pastors to serve as pastoral counselors, and there is a need felt among rural pastors for help in that area of ministry. What are rural pastors supposed to do? They can look at books on counseling and will find great amounts of information on a wide variety of specific issues but are likely to find most of them too technical or theoretical to be useful. They can look for books on rural ministry, but they are few and far between, and they rarely focus on issues of pastoral counseling. They can look to books on pastoral care which provide a good overview on caring for their people but lack specifics on helping address specific needs. It would be possible for pastors to read some of each and pull together the information they need, but the reality of rural ministry means that time and resources are at a premium and the rural mindset, which includes rural pastors as well as congregants, is slanted toward practical ministry over hours spent in study of anything but the Bible.

Some other resource is needed: a resource that is geared toward the specific issues rural pastors face, that offers solid practical advice without the need for technical expertise or hours wading through intimidating counseling tomes. Part of this project was the creation of such a resource. A copy of this guide is presented in appendix B.

### **The Purpose of the Quick Reference Guide for Rural Pastors**

The goal of this project is to produce a quick pastoral counseling reference guide that will aid rural pastors. The hard truth is that pastoral counseling is not something that comes easily or quickly. It is complicated, it is messy, and issues are often intertwined and deeply rooted in people's lives. This is why most well-researched books on counseling are hundreds if not thousands of pages long. It is why counselors go to school

for years to be trained and equipped to come alongside others, because there are no quick solutions. This is a truth that most rural pastors are well aware of; it is also why many rural pastors are intimidated at the thought of serving as pastoral counselors.

This quick reference guide for rural pastors is not intended to replace or short circuit the need for deeper training or understanding. As was shown in chapter 2,<sup>1</sup> further training and equipping is one of a few factors that seem to affect directly how equipped pastors feel for the counseling challenges they face. However, the same research showed that the smaller and more rural an area a pastor is ministering in, the less likely the pastor is to have received such training. Because of this it was felt that the best option was to put together a resource on pastoral counseling geared specifically toward these pastors.

There is no way that any work, no matter how large, can capture all there is to know about pastoral counseling. This is doubly true for smaller works like this one. The quick reference guide for rural pastors is not intended to make rural pastors experts or give them all the answers. Instead it is intended to help equip them in a small way to the challenges they face; to help them understand the issues their congregants are facing and feel more prepared to respond biblically and practically in their context. If this work can help pastors take one step in that direction, then it will have fulfilled its purpose.

### **Issues Faced by Rural Pastors**

The process of putting together a quick reference guide for rural pastors begins with deciding which issues to address. This provides an interesting challenge because issues like eating disorders, suicide, and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are likely

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1. See rural pastors' responses in chapter 2.

to arise at some time in a rural pastor's ministry, and they are the types of issues that are complex enough to feel especially overwhelming. However, issues like anger, depression, and worry are much more common. In working through this dilemma I was reminded of a conversation I had with a doctor in my congregation. In talking to him about what he does, he mentioned that he was in a new field of medical work known as a hospitalist. In years past when a person went to the hospital it was common for their general physician to come to the hospital to provide care for them there. This is less and less common even in rural communities. Instead of general practitioners coming to the hospital, people are likely to be treated by a doctor kept on staff for just such a purpose by the hospitals themselves; this is what is known as a hospitalist. Reflecting on this I commented to him, "That must be hard. Since you work at the hospital, you don't get to spend your time doing general checkups. Instead you get all the crazy stuff that's so bad people have to go to the hospital. I bet it's hard to keep up with all of the issues that come through your door." His answer surprised me. He said that it is not too bad; in general he faces the same few issues over and over again: broken bones, heart attacks, and pneumonia. Other things pop up, but once he learned to address those major issues everything got a lot easier.

With that insight in mind I decided to take a similar approach when putting together a pastoral counseling guide for rural pastors. I would choose five of the most prominent issues faced by rural pastors and address them knowing that in helping pastors cope with some of the most common issues they face, I can do the most to lighten their load as pastoral counselors. While other issues will no doubt arise, the most help can be done by helping pastors address their most common issues. The following table, which

was presented in chapter 2 in a fuller form, shows the most prominent issues rural pastors face.

**Table 5: Pastoral counseling issues ranked by top responses**

<b>Pastoral counseling issue</b>	<b>Number of pastors who ranked issue in their top five</b>
Conflict resolution	24
Grief	21
Depression	19
Marriage counseling	16
Divorce	15
Anger	14
Cancer	12
Worry	10
Child abuse	9
Adultery	7
Alcoholism	2
Domestic abuse	2

Issues like marriage counseling, divorce, and grief were prominent; however, it was also decided that they are issues pastors are most likely to have some training or experience in. Most pastors learn about weddings and funerals in some form during their education and have likely established their own ways of addressing such issues. Similarly the epidemic of cancer arose as a common issue, but it is likely that most pastors care for it as they would other health problems, although cancer care in rural ministry might prove an interesting and beneficial issue for future study.

With these considerations in mind four major issues arose: conflict resolution, depression, anger, and worry. Not only are they common issues, but also they are issues that bring their own unique challenges in rural ministry. The final issue chosen to address was abuse. Both child abuse and domestic abuse were prominent issues, although to a

lesser degree. However, the complexity of addressing the issue of abuse, especially in a rural community, was enough to warrant its inclusion in the rural pastors' guide.

### **Balancing Information and Views**

When putting together the guide it was important not only to choose appropriate issues to address but also to provide appropriate information. This is especially challenging because of the wide spectrum of approaches to pastoral counseling. On one end of the spectrum there could be those who see the task of pastoral counseling as one primarily rooted in psychology: understanding of thinking patterns, family of origin, and brain chemistry. There are others who see pastoral counseling as primarily a spiritual endeavor and that any issues faced are inherently rooted in sin. Those with this mindset believe that all the truths needed to address such issues are rooted in the Scriptures and that a pastor's duty is help unearth that sin and bring the person back into a healthy relationship with God. While rural pastors may not use such terms to describe their approach to pastoral counseling, it is likely that the people who taught them about pastoral counseling in school would. This means that even if pastoral counselors do not know it, they are likely biased toward a psychological or spiritual approach in their pastoral counseling.

For this reason, it is important to try and balance the information presented about issues like conflict management and worry in the pastor's guide. In addressing each subject an effort is made to provide a biblical documentation helping pastors know what the Bible has to say about an issue, as well as helping pastors keep a biblical perspective as pastoral counselors. However, practical information more reflective of modern



psychology is also presented, such as styles of conflict resolution or important diagnostic questions to try and understand how worry is affecting someone's life. Not only is it important for both types of information to be presented as a way to fully equip pastors, but also on a practical level there needs to be something to connect with pastors where they are on the spectrum of counseling to get them to engage in the first place. I once sat through an informative and educational seminar on pastoral counseling in a rural context, only to hear a rural minister disregard the information entirely because this person felt there were not enough foundational biblical references in the work. This struggle is why a balance of information is so important when putting together such a guide.

### **Designed with Rural Pastors in Mind**

Putting together a pastoral counseling guide for rural pastors is not just about choosing issues that affect them, or the right information to present. Another major part of this is presenting the information in a way that is uniquely tailored toward rural pastors and those with the rural mindset. One major way that can be seen is that this was put together as a quick reference guide, with emphasis on quick and reference. Even if there were a two-thousand-page exhaustive guide to pastoral counseling written with a focus on rural ministry, it is unlikely that the average rural pastor would be willing, or able, to take the time to sit down and read it. The rural mindset comes into play in a number of ways. First, as has already been mentioned, many in rural America value practical, hands-on work that a person can see to internal work, like exhaustive reading and reflection. This means that for many rural pastors the time invested in reading a large reference book would come last on their priority list behind the weekly "necessities" of ministry. Also,

the rural mindset is more geared toward making do with what one has and addressing issues when they arise, as opposed to laying plans for an uncertain future. This means that many rural pastors will be willing to think about conflict, anger, and depression when the issues come up in their congregation, but they may not value that information before it is needed. Because of this, rural pastors need a way to get the information they need quickly and efficiently—hence a quick reference guide. This means that length and layout were important issues when putting together the guide.

Because of this need to read and digest reference material quickly, length played a major part in assembling the guide for pastors. The truth is that even a fifty-page book on a subject, which to many experienced counselors might seem startlingly short, would be too long for rural pastors to read through, especially when they are looking for help on an issue and they have a congregant who called and is on their way over to the church. In speaking with Ron Klassen, the executive director of the Rural Home Missionary Association (RHMA), it was established that about five to ten pages would be the ideal length for a chapter on any given subject. Even though the information on issues is presented in chapters in the guide, I approached writing the guide as I would writing a pamphlet: putting together information in a brief, concise, and straightforward manner.

It was also important to think about how the information would be presented in each chapter. Anyone who has read a textbook with page after page of text with no subheadings knows how overwhelming such a sight can be. Not only do readers lose focus, but without those breaks, the information bleeds together. Such a presentation would be likely to turn off rural pastors. Therefore, I tried to put together information in bite-sized bits, keeping sections to a single page if possible. An effort was made to create

subsections that are easily recognizable and to use italics to pull out key ideas in each section. The focus on layout even affected the choice of font and line spacing. A layout that is more similar to a novel than to a textbook was chosen to try and create a presentation that was appealing and engaging to pastors rather than intimidating.

### **Rural Pastor's Quick Reference Guide to Pastoral Counseling**

This guide has been put together with rural pastors in mind. The issues addressed—conflict, depression, worry, anger, and abuse—are some of the most prevalent and pressing in rural ministry. Both biblical information and practical advice from the larger counseling world are integrated for pastors to read. This information is presented in a format that is both clear and concise in an effort to make it a reference work that pastors can access quickly when needs arise in their ministry, or can easily turn back to for a refresher when needed. It is hoped that by focusing on these factors, a resource can be created that will meet the needs felt by rural pastors.

### **Evaluation Process**

A true test of the effectiveness of this guide can only truly come with time and experience in ministry, which does not happen on a predetermined time schedule. Without that, the next best option is critical feedback from rural pastors themselves. To do this I contacted five pastors, each with their own diverse background in rural ministry, to provide feedback on the rural pastor's guide. The first is a pastor in a town of less than two hundred in rural Nebraska. The second pastor ministers in a rural context much like my own, where rural life has become more suburbanized. The third pastor ministers in

another small rural town and is completing his master's degree in biblical counseling.

The fourth pastor reviewing the work is pastor emeritus of a unique type of rural church, a large one, with attendance of more than five hundred. The final evaluator is Ron Klassen, a former pastor, and executive director of RHMA. This diverse group of pastors will allow me to understand how the *Pastoral Counseling: A Rural Pastor's Guide* would be seen from a number of different rural ministries and backgrounds.

Evaluators will be provided a copy of *Pastoral Counseling: A Rural Pastor's Guide* to read, as well as a survey to fill out and return. They will be asked to comment generally on issues presented, the balance of information, as well as the layout and presentation. They will also be asked to reflect more deeply on a specific chapter that resonated with them. A copy of the evaluation can be found in appendix C, and the results of their evaluations are discussed in chapter 6.

## CHAPTER SIX

### OUTCOMES

#### **Feedback on the Rural Pastor's Guide**

This project began in response to my own struggles and shortcomings as a pastoral counselor in a small, rural town. Anecdotal evidence indicated that I was not the only rural pastor facing these struggles, but little to no research had been done on what was happening in the lives and ministries of rural pastors. It was my hope that this project could begin to change that. This led to a research study of the pastoral counseling ministries of almost forty rural pastors, which revealed not only that rural pastors were struggling as pastoral counselors, but the issues they were facing as well. In an attempt to meet that need, a quick reference guide to pastoral counseling for rural pastors was assembled. This was put together uniquely with rural ministers in mind, from the issues addressed, to the way information about the issues was balanced between biblical and psychological insights, to the layout of the work itself.

The work was submitted to five rural pastors of varied background for review, and the response was almost universally positive. Perhaps the most encouraging response, and the response that best reflects the unique nature of rural pastors, came from the pastor who wrote, “Good work. Very good work. I’m not trying to pat you on the head like a little boy—I am deeply impressed and wish I’d had that paper fifty years ago when I was starting out.”

## Presentation

Pastors were responsive to the overall presentation of *Pastoral Counseling: A Rural Pastor's Guide*. As one pastor wrote, "I appreciate the succinctness, clarity, and accuracy of the guide." This is a rather verbose response compared with most of the other pastors who responded along the lines of, "I thought it was good." The truth is that style and form are not necessarily things that rural pastors are accustomed to reflecting on. It was encouraging to hear that simple choices in presentation, like using pneumatic devices to help make the material more memorable, had made a difference in helping things jump out to pastors. One pastor commented, "I liked the acronyms for application in the different areas."

In reflecting on the length of the manual I could pick up on an interesting tension from pastors. On the one hand they liked that this work was put together as a quick reference guide, something they could pick it up and read through it in one sitting if needed. As a pastor responded:

Busy pastors need a quick-access kind of manual. They need something that is laid out in such a way that the issue the pastor is facing can be easily found. They need something that is brief, so that they don't have to wade through a lot of verbiage. And, they need something that is written in a user-friendly, readable, and clear manner. This manual fulfills all of these superbly.

On the other hand I could tell that the manual has reaching an unmet need because pastors were eager to learn about more strategies, topics, insights, and issues. One pastor did an excellent job of summing up the tension between having an accessible, quick reference work and providing even more information by saying, "If anything, I think [the chapters] could be a little bit longer, but then you run the risk of missing your goal of

being a quick, go-to guide.” Overall rural pastors had a positive response to the presentation of the guide, feeling it would be appealing and approachable to rural pastors.

### Issues

Pastors stated that the issues addressed in the manual were pertinent for their ministries and addressed in a way that was uniquely tailored to rural ministry. Even though the issues addressed were culled from a study of rural pastors, it was still encouraging to hear from these pastors that they felt the issues addressed were ones that connected with their own ministries. The responses were uniformly similar in the best of ways, as one pastor said, “These are pertinent issues that I have dealt with in rural ministry. Their inclusion in this paper represents the main concerns a rural pastor will face.” Pastors also felt that the issues themselves were addressed in a way that was specific to their rural context, with many making comments along the lines of the pastor who wrote, “I really appreciated the observations of rural culture.”

It was easy to tell that these issues connected with pastors’ own ministries in reading through the responses. There was a definite desire to know and share more about them. For instance, in reflecting on the chapter on abuse, one pastor was hoping that I would “add some words on dealing with children caught in abuse,” while another was hoping for information on an abuser’s angry response toward the pastor.

Sometimes people are mad at God—but they can’t reach Him—so they take it out on you. You are His representative. Sometimes they are mad that you know their little secret and what they’ve been doing to their wife or children. How do you handle a confrontation?

Along those lines, in reflecting on the section on depression, one pastor wondered if I could talk about “financial insolvency/bankruptcy (especially farm and small business)—very prevalent, especially in agricultural communities. This can cause severe depression, especially in men, because of such things as loss of legacy.” These bits of feedback were a reminder that I was touching on areas that rural pastors face in their everyday ministry. Also, while pastors were asking for more information about issues, knowing rural pastors, this is most likely their way of letting me know that when they read those chapters they were thinking about specific instances they faced in their ministry, and letting me know about some unexpected issues that they faced which I had not yet addressed. It is a great reminder that the issues addressed in the guide are the ones pastors face and struggle with in regular ministry, and it provides insight on how chapters on issues could be expanded in the future.

Although I have plenty of data to provide other potential issues to address, it was still enlightening to learn what issues pastors would add to the current guide. Suggestions ranged from expected issues like substance abuse, to family heartache, to the suggestion of adding a chapter on general counseling practices to help “move a pastor from passive trepidation to confidence.”

### Balance

Perhaps the most interesting area of response from pastors had to do with the matter of balancing biblical insights in pastoral counseling with modern psychological insight. In the question regarding balance, all of the pastors said that they appreciated the balance presented in the guide. In my bias I assumed I had struck an even balance



between the two, but most of the responders rightfully saw that things were shifted toward the spiritual side of things, though not in a bad way. As a pastor wrote, “I think it appropriately tilts toward biblical insights, while also recognizing that all truth is God’s truth, and thus there are helpful insights that can be gleaned from extra-biblical sources.”

While all of the pastors felt there was a good balance, when directly asked the question it was interesting to see leanings play out in other areas of response. For instance, one pastor showed willingness to embrace modern psychology going as far as to note, “I don’t view that psychology and Scripture are at odds. There are some great psychological insights in the Proverbs. Now, modern, atheistic psychology is definitely contrary to Scripture, but as I’m typing this I realize this is a rabbit-trail discussion that would be better done in person,” showing his eagerness to help me understand his perspective. By contrast, one pastor noted a greater desire for a biblical emphasis, especially when dealing with unbelievers in the community, writing:

One thing I was thinking about as I read through this was that often the rural pastor is going to be seen as the community counselor. That means that unbelievers will often seek the pastor out in times of crisis when they would otherwise have nothing to do with him. A pastor needs to be prepared within the counseling to point people to God’s love and grace to give them what they need to overcome their difficulty.

It is an interesting reminder of the challenge in putting together a counseling guide for rural pastors: pastors, even myself, may feel they represent a balanced position but many lean one way or another. The goal of this work was to connect with pastors wherever they are on that continuum and help equip them for service to the kingdom, which I believe the guide achieved.

## Final Thoughts

Overall the response of pastors was positive and encouraging, with more than one pastor expressing the wish that had something like this had been available when the pastor first entered ministry. These are heartening words.

Over the course of this work I have sought to better understand the ministry of pastors in rural America. My research has shown that they face a great need, and it is not a need that they can ignore, because they have been called as shepherds to the flock of God. Resources to help such pastors are few and far between, and the amount of reading required on a rural pastor's part to gather information on biblical and psychological insights that are specifically geared toward rural ministry is beyond what is realistic in rural ministry. Therefore, I sought to put together a quick reference counseling guide to help rural pastors better understand the struggles their congregants are facing, and to help them better understand how God can use them to respond. The response to the guide was positive and encouraging. Based on their response, it is clear that the guide addresses the need that rural pastors are facing by meeting them where they are in ministry and presenting God's truth in an accessible and enlightening way.

## Areas for Further Study

Areas for further study and development of this material could go in one of two ways; the first would be to broaden the scope of material addressed while keeping it a quick reference guide. As mentioned, while exploring pastoral feedback to the guide there are a number of additional chapters that could be written addressing generalized issues such as substance abuse, gambling, and financial struggles. Also, chapters could be

written addressing less common but more complex issues, such as homosexuality, eating disorders, suicide, or gender identity issues. My research has shown that while these issues are less common, there is still a decent chance<sup>2</sup> that they will arise at some point in a pastor's ministry. Chapters could also be added on the front end of the book addressing counseling practice itself, with information on counseling practice, on reaching out to people who are reluctant to ask for help, to setting up a safe place for counseling to take place. The field of counseling is so broad and varied that this work could expand to include any number of issues. The positive response to the initial issues addressed indicates that this would be an encouraging direction to move in.

Rather than broadening the context of the work, another way that this study could be continued is by looking in depth at a particular issue within its rural context. Obvious choices would be issues like anger, depression, and worry. However, an issue like cancer care could prove beneficial to many as long as it reflects the unique needs and challenges of such a struggle in rural life. The key to deepening the study of any of these issues would be to keep the exploration practical and relevant rather than simply expanding background information or theory.

Even though there is still much work to be done in studying and understanding rural ministry it is hoped that this project has cast an important light in that direction. For those familiar, and unfamiliar, with rural ministry it has provided a deeper understanding of what rural ministry is and provided qualitative insight into what rural pastors face on a regular basis. For those pastors serving in rural ministries a potential resource has been created to help them in their ministries as pastoral counselors which applies directly to

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2. Twenty percent; see table 1 in chapter 2.

their rural context. The overwhelming positive response to the guide is a good indicator that rural pastors are open and eager for resources geared toward them. In their hearts rural pastors understand that to God there are no small places. But when these pastors in towns of one hundred and five hundred, with congregations smaller than many Sunday school classes at larger churches, see people valuing and appreciating and catching that godly vision that there are no small places, it is a great boon to their hearts and ministries.

APPENDIX A  
PASTORAL SURVEY

Dear fellow Pastor,

At the RHMA conference this past week you expressed interest in participating in the following ten-minute questionnaire. It is designed to get valuable feedback from you about pastoral counseling in a rural context. It will be used in my doctoral thesis at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary as I try to understand the pastoral counseling challenges faced by rural pastors.

Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this questionnaire, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study.

Thank you for your time and for your service to the kingdom.

With warm regards,

Adam Kipp

**How much time in an average week do you estimate you spend in pastoral counseling formally (in your office) or informally? (Please choose one)**

Less than 1 hour  
1-2 hours  
3-4 hours  
5-6 hours  
7-8 hours  
More than 8 hours

**Below you will find a number of counseling situations that a pastor might encounter in the course of ministry. Please check any that you have counseled during your ministry with individuals or families.**

Abortion	Financial counseling
Adultery	Gambling addiction
Alcoholism	Grief
Anger	Guilt
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	Homosexuality
Autism	Infertility
Bipolar disorder	Loneliness
Cancer	Marriage counseling
Child abuse	Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder
Conflict resolution	Panic attacks
Depression	Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
Divorce	Suicide
Domestic abuse	Worry
Drug addiction	Other: Please record below
Eating disorders	
Fear	

**Based on the counseling situations you checked above, please rank the five most common issues you face in your ministry with one representing the most common issue.**

1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.

**During the course of your education, how many classes have you taken to prepare you for the counseling needs you face in ministry? (Please choose one.)**

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- More than 4

**Please indicate your current level of preparedness to address the counseling needs you face in your ministry. (Please choose one.)**

- Poor
- Fair
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

For the rest of this questionnaire, counseling services refers generally to counseling help from experienced individuals such as counselors or psychologists, as well as helps available through state or county agencies.

**Are there any counseling services available within a 60-minute drive of your ministry?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**If yes, among these available services are there any that you would feel comfortable referring a congregant to?**

- Yes
- No
- N/A

**When faced with a pastoral counseling situation beyond your level of preparedness, which of the following actions are you most likely to take? Please check up to three options.**

- |                                     |                               |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Contact a counselor friend for help | Look for help in a book       |
| Contact a ministry friend for help  | Look in Scripture             |
| Contact RHMA                        | Look online for help          |
| Look at class notes from seminary   | Refer to a counseling service |

**What could RHMA do to help you with the pastoral counseling situations you face as a small-town pastor? Please select all that apply.**

Offer a seminar on pastoral counseling

Offer a class in the TACT (RHMA's Town and Country Training) program on pastoral counseling

Have a qualified counselor available to answer questions

Other:

Please tell us a little more about yourself

**What is your gender?**

Male   Female

**What is the highest level of education you have completed?**

High school diploma or equivalent

Business or trade school

Some college

Associate or two-year degree

Bachelor's or four-year degree

Some graduate or professional school

Graduate or professional degree

Post-graduate degree

**How many years have you served in pastoral ministry?**

0-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

More than 20

**Please estimate the population of the town you minister in**

0-499

500-999

1000-4999

5000-9999

10,000-14,999

15,000-29,999

More than 29,999



APPENDIX B

A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE FOR RURAL PASTORS

# **Pastoral Counseling**

**A quick reference guide for  
rural pastors**

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Adam Kipp

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Introduction

Depression

Worry

Conflict

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## Introduction

As a pastor in a rural church you were likely trained to do one primary thing, preach the Word. Yet many rural pastors find themselves asked to do a lot of extra things like running meetings, organizing worship, or even fixing the church AC unit. Perhaps the most intimidating of these extra roles rural pastors find themselves in is that of a counselor.

This can be especially difficult because you know God wants to you help people as their shepherd, you know the struggles in their life and that they could use your help, but many times when people come to you as a pastoral counselor you find you don't know what to say. You are not alone in this; it is a struggle that many rural pastors face, and it is why this guide was put together.

This quick reference guide is intended as a tool to help you as a pastoral counselor. It doesn't have all of the answers, nor is it a substitute for further training and education. Rather it is intended as reference guide to turn to when there's a knock on your door or your phone rings and the person on the other end says, "Pastor, I could use some help. Can we talk?" and you realize you could use some help yourself.

The following guide addresses five of the most common issues that rural pastors face: depression, worry, conflict, anger, and abuse.

# Depression

## DEPRESSION IN RURAL AMERICA

Studies have shown that 5 to 10% of the US population suffers from depression. Depression is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness and malaise. It can be brought on by a variety of factors including stress over sickness in the herd, uncertainty over what will happen with another family leaving town, or long sleepless nights driving the combine. Cultural aspects of rural life, such as reluctance to talk about emotional struggles or a mentality that says, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and get over it," can further compound struggles. Because of this it is no surprise that *depression is one of the most common issues rural pastors face.*

## DEPRESSION IN THE BIBLE

**Psalms 55:1-7** - Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert . . .

**Job 10:18-19** - "Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave!"

**Psalms 69:1-3** - Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

**1 Kings 19:3-4** - Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

**Matthew 26:37-38** - He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

**Psalms 43:5** - Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

**Psalm 30:11** - You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy . . .

**Psalm 107:13-14** - Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.

### **CAUSES OF DEPRESSION**

It's important to understand that depression can have both spiritual and physical roots in people's lives.

*Sin and guilt* – when people feel like they have failed spiritually, then feelings of remorse, condemnation, hopelessness, disappointment, and many other signs associated with depression may arise.

David is a classic example of a biblical person who experienced depression as a result of his sin. However, the stories of Job, Elijah, and even Christ in Gethsemane remind us that many other factors can lead to heavy and weary hearts.

*Stress* – Stressful situations are linked to feelings of depression. Whether it is record levels of rainfall or drought, a bad diagnosis from the doctor, efforts to pass a much needed school levy, or even conflict in the church over moving the organ, rural America has no shortage of stressful situations.

*Life upheaval* – Big changes are hard for everyone, but especially those in rural America where the preferred form of change is slow and steady, or sometimes not at all. When a son moves off to college or when a piece of land is sold that has been in the family for generations, it can lead to depression as people struggle with that change.

*Pessimistic patterns* – Rural Americans tend to be more pessimistic, not because they want to be, but as a way to protect themselves from being disappointed in an uncertain place. However, expecting the worst and planning for the worst can often lead to seeing the worst in situations and people as well. These pessimistic patterns can also leave people feeling discouraged and depressed.

*Biological factors* – Sometimes depression has roots not in our minds but in our bodies. A few examples of this are postpartum depression, which comes after as a woman's hormone levels readjust following the birth of a child; seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, which tends to show up in winter months when people don't get as much sunlight; or even as a side effect from a medication a person is taking for a completely different issue.

## COUNSELING DEPRESSION<sup>1</sup>

Because depression can be very isolating and discouraging, especially for believers who would prefer that God just take these feelings of sadness away, a good place to start might be to *assure people that depression is a common occurrence*, that they are not alone in their struggle. It may be helpful to point them to godly people in the Scriptures who faced struggles like their own.

Take time and talk with the person and *look for the root cause of their depression*. They may be able to tell you exactly what it is. If not, ask them to tell you about what's been going on in their life and you may be able to see something that they don't.

*Help them gain a godly perspective on their struggle*. As their pastor, help draw people, and their struggles, into God's presence. Not in a "God says cheer up" way; rather help them understand his grace, his comfort, and his care for them during their struggle. While it's easy for pastors to tell people what the Bible says, it may prove beneficial to take them to a verse and ask, "What do you think this has to say about God's perspective on your struggles?" to help them see it and say it for themselves.

So far most of your discussion may have focused on knowing and understanding things, but there is also a place for you to *help them make changes in their life*. There may be a pattern they want to change, a wrong they need to right, or a shift they need to make in their daily schedule. Depression often leeches the energy and motivation out of those who struggle with it, so it may be appropriate to step in gently and help encourage and direct them in making some positive changes in their life.

You should also be prepared to *repeat* it all again. Depression is not something people overcome in an instant. It will likely be a journey in which you walk alongside them for some time, offering encouragement and prayer as a shepherd of God's own sheep.

## AVOIDING A BOOTSTRAP MENTALITY

When counseling someone who is struggling with depression it is important to avoid a mentality that pushes them to suck it up, try harder, pray, and just be happy. Especially in Christians this sort of interaction pushes people further into depression. They feel like they are letting God down. They feel like they are letting you down. And they struggle with why they can't just change when their pastor makes it seem so easy. Like most change in rural areas, instead of looking for instantaneous results, encourage slow and steady progress allowing that they may take two steps forward then one or steps back.

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<sup>1</sup> Many ideas in this section are adapted from Collins, *Christian Counseling*.

## ADDRESSING PESSIMISTIC PATTERNS<sup>2</sup>

When working to help people break out of pessimistic patterns, saying “look on the bright side” is likely to lead back into a bootstrap mentality. Instead it may be helpful to encourage them to think about making some of the positive choices outlined below.

*Choose to see God’s sovereign love* – Encourage them to look for the way God might be at work to help them understand his love even in the midst of their struggle. **Romans 8:28:** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

*Choose gratitude* – Help them to look for the blessing that God has provided and continues to provide in their lives. **Philippians 4:8:** Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— think about such things.

*Choose to dwell on truth* – Much of the struggle of depression happens within the mind with questions about what God is doing and why and worries that they might be doing something wrong. Draw people out of this ethereal world and encourage them to choose to focus on the promises of God and the truth of his Word. **Matthew 11:28-29:** Come to me, all

you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

## WHAT ABOUT MEDICATIONS?

While pastors cannot prescribe medication for depression; they may interact with people who have had medications prescribed for them, or who they think might need to a prescription medication. Because of this it’s important to understand medication’s role in working with depression. The truth is that in cases of low level to moderate depression, talking about the issue has been shown to be more effective in treating depression than medications. However, in cases where people struggle with moderate to high levels of depression, especially where biological factors are involved, medication has been shown to be an effective part of the treatment process. As Ken Swetland says, in these situations pastors should understand that medications are generally not prescribed to “take people up into the clouds but to provide a floor to stand on.”

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ashmore, Margaret. *Depression: The Sun Always Rises. The Gospel for Real Life*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013.

Collins, Gary R. *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3rd ed. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Ashmore, *Depression*.

Strauss, Claudia J. *Talking to Depression: Simple Ways to Connect When Someone in Your Life Is Depressed*. New York: New American Library, 2004.

## Worry

### A WORRIED CHURCH

Anxiety, apprehension, fear, stress: worry goes by many names in rural America. But with the uncertainties of rural life, from rising river levels due to record rains to a change in the town makeup as suburbanites move in and start calling their familiar town a commuter community, worry will arise. The independent nature of rural people tends to complicate the matter because instead of addressing and talking about these worries, which tends to be helpful in addressing them, they are often bottled up inside.

### WORRY IN THE BIBLE

**Proverbs 12:25** - An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.

**Philippians 4:6-7** - Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.



**Matthew 6:25-26** - “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

**1 Peter 5:7** - Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

**Matthew 11:28-30** - “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

**John 14:27** - “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

**Psalms 55:22** - Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.

**Joshua 1:9** – “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

## IS WORRY ALWAYS BAD?

In its most basic form worry is a form of concern, and that’s not always a bad thing. Even Paul, who says in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything,” uses the same root word to talk positively about Timothy’s concern for the Philippians in 2:20. It may be helpful *to think of worry as an overplayed strength*. If a farm has been operating at a loss for two years or if a person is diagnosed with cancer, they should be concerned. Concern can be a positive response that moves them to act. However, when that concern becomes something that keeps them up at night, that makes them afraid to go to church, or that leads to panic attacks, it is no longer a positive response. Because of this spectrum helping a congregant address worry isn’t so much about eliminating it, saying “don’t worry,” as it is about helping them change their response and what they do with their concern.

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF WORRY

When first talking to a congregant about the worry in their life it may be helpful to remember the acronym OLD, because by the time they talk to you these stressful feelings have probably gotten old.

*Often* – talk to them about how often their feelings of worry arise. Is it something that happens on a daily basis or once in a blue moon?

*Length* – When the worry arises in their life, how long does it last? Is it a passing feeling or is this something that sits with them for days on end?

*Degree* – Talk with them about the degree of their worry and how intense is it. Is their worry a feeling, does it have physical effects on them, does their blood pressure rise, does it cause panic attacks?

### WORKING THROUGH WORRY TOGETHER

Begin by remembering to *keep calm*. As a pastor if you are anxious and upset it will only increase your congregant's own worry. However, if you have a calm, assuring attitude that welcomes them in love and is open to hearing about their worries, it will do much to put them at ease.

Next, *talk together about the source of their worry*.<sup>3</sup> Worry has many sources; three major ones to keep in mind are loss, conflict, and fear. Experiencing the *loss* of a job or family member or the potential for such a loss can be a source of worry. The fear of *conflict* with another person, especially in an environment as interconnected as a rural community, can be a mighty source of anxiety. Everyone has a *fear* of something: death, sickness, or even public speaking. If the course of life has brought them face to face with one of their fears, worry is likely to ensue. If your parishioner struggles to

understand a source for their anxiety, questions like “When was the last time you were really anxious?” or even “When was the last time you felt truly free of worry?” may help.

With the source of their worry in mind, take some time and *help them gain a spiritual perspective* on their worry. Never forget that as a pastor you have the unique opportunity to draw your congregant, and their struggles, into the presence of the Lord. This doesn't mean telling them that Jesus said, “Don't worry.” Instead it means encouraging them to think about God's strength and support in the midst of their struggles. Questions like, “How could God help you when worry starts to rise up?” or, “What do you think God would want you to know about him in that situation?” may help direct your conversation.

Once people understand God's desire to help them through their worry, it's good to *help them gain personal perspective* as well. Help them think through what actions they can take that would help make them feel more at ease and in control during worrisome situations. Because your goal is to help them learn to cope with the worrisome situations in their life, do not be afraid to gently place responsibility in their hands, encouraging them to take specific actions in response to the next time worry arises.

Even after walking through all of these steps with someone it's important to *follow up*. For many rural citizens talking to a pastor once about an issue like this is one time more than they

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 143-48.

would like. However, it's likely that their worry and anxiety will not go away after one meeting. To help with this struggle it might be appropriate to follow up and ask how they are doing or to ask how you can pray for them to open up the door for follow-up.

#### RESPONDING WITH PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9<sup>4</sup>

Philippians 4 is one of the most well-known passages on anxiety, and it may prove beneficial to work through with your congregant to help them understand how they can respond in times of anxiety and worry.

**Philippians 4:4-9**<sup>4</sup> *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*<sup>5</sup> *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*<sup>6</sup> *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*<sup>7</sup> *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*<sup>8</sup> *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things.*<sup>9</sup> *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from *Christian Counseling*, 154-55.

*Rejoice in the Lord (4:4)* – Paul reminds believers that no matter how hard and difficult life is, believers always have reason to rejoice because of Christ's deep love for them. Even in the hardest situations Christ is always at work on their behalf.

*Be gentle (4:5)* – A hard and condemning attitude in life often builds anxiety and stress in people. However, a gracious and gentle attitude often reduces it.

*Pray (4:6-7)* – Though Paul calls believers to bring all of their anxieties, big and small, before God, believers are called to bring their thanksgiving and blessings before him in prayer as well. God promises a peace beyond our own understanding for those who do.

*Be positive (4:8)* – In the midst of their care and stress believers are encouraged to focus not on the negatives and what ifs, but on what is right and pure and lovely.

*Put this into practice (4:9)* – Paul exhorts his readers not only to know these truths he has shared, but also to act on them, to put them into work in their own lives.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Do not to underestimate the importance of encouraging words for those who struggle with worry. Because they already struggle with worry, telling them to stop, or get over

it, even trying to encourage them to just let go of their worry, is likely to make them even more anxious and worried when they can't release their worry the way you have described. It's important to understand that while you may be able to see around and beyond their worry, they may not be able to. Telling them not be worried, and even logically explaining to them why they shouldn't be worried may not help because *you can't fight irrational fear with rational thinking*. Instead encourage them that there is hope through God, that you are there to help them through this as well, and encourage and celebrate the progress that you see them make.

#### **WORRY AND COMPLAINTS IN THE RURAL CHURCH**

If you start to hear complaints about an issue in the church it may be a reflection of unvoiced worries in your congregation. For instance, if some older members of your congregations complain about you helping with the youth group on Wednesdays it may be because they are worried that fewer and fewer adults are coming to their prayer meeting, which is itself a reflection of a deeper worry that they will be forgotten as the church changes. Some *complaints you hear may be tied more to their worry than your actions*. Understanding the heart of those worries may enable you to address those concerns in a more meaningful way.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Collins, Gary R. *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3rd ed. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

Kellemen, Robert W. *Anxiety: Anatomy and Cure*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012.

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# Conflict

## CONFLICT IN THE RURAL CHURCH

Conflict arises in every church, but it poses a special challenge in rural churches for a number of reasons.

*Everyone is connected* in rural churches. Not only do people in rural churches worship together, but also they serve on the volunteer fire department together, and their kids go to school together where they both serve on the school board. This connectedness means that rural people in conflict will have trouble ignoring or avoiding one another. It also means that their conflict will be public knowledge at church, at the volunteer fire department, and in the school.

Second, *small conflict has a big impact* on the rural church. In a church of five thousand, or even five hundred, conflict between a few people can be a relatively small issue in the grand scheme of things, but in a church of fifty an unresolved conflict that leads to a family leaving the church could mean a quarter of the church is gone.

Third, in the rural church *conflict can be generational*. An escalating conflict over Sunday school material may not make

sense to a pastor until he learns that the two families in conflict have been at odds for forty years following a dispute over land rights. This means that even small issues of conflict in the church may be a part of something bigger.

## THE ORIGIN OF CONFLICT

Conflict may be especially challenging in the rural church, but its ultimate origin isn't on a farm but in a garden. Conflict, miscommunications, and disagreements originate with sin itself. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, conflict arose. When God confronts Adam with his sin in Genesis 3:12 he fires back, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it," coming into conflict with both his wife and his God because of his sin. Because conflict is rooted in sin, and sin is rooted in the hearts of people, conflict will arise in even the best of churches.

## THE PASTOR'S ROLE AND GOAL IN CONFLICT

When this conflict does arise it is important for pastors to differentiate between their role and their goal in addressing it. *Pastors fill the role of peacemakers* when there is conflict in the rural church. Congregants will often look to the pastor as an impartial mediator when issues of concern arise. This was the case with Moses (Ex 18:16), with David (2 Sam 15:2), and with Jesus (Luke 12:13), so it should not surprise pastors that people will look to them to fill this role as peacemaker.

However, the *pastor's goal is for God to be glorified* (Isa 43:7, 1 Cor 10:31). This is of vital importance because if pastors see their goal as making peace, they will measure their effectiveness and worth on whether everyone leaves happy and reconciliation is achieved. This sets pastors up to fail as even the best of pastors, doing everything right, cannot guarantee that two people will be reconciled. Pastors may serve as peacemakers, but pastors cannot ultimately make peace in people's hearts.

Instead the pastor's goal should be to glorify God. Pastors can do this by helping people understand the conflict as well as what it means in light of God's grace and forgiveness and, yes, at times, justice. This focus on God's glory allows pastors to fill the role of peacemaker and achieve the goal of glorifying God even in situations where resolution is not possible.

#### **BIBLE VERSES FOR PASTORS AND PEACEMAKERS**

**Matthew 5:9** – “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

**Proverbs 15:1** - A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

**Proverbs 11:14** - For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.

**Proverbs 18:17** - The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.

**2 Timothy 1:7** - For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

**Galatians 6:1** - Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

#### **BIBLE VERSES ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

**Matthew 18:15-17** – “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

**James 1:19-20** - My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

## A QUESTION EVERY PASTOR SHOULD ASK

Before stepping in to address an area of conflict a pastor should ask this important question: “Am I needed?” This may sound simple, but the truth is that pastors with a heart for their people often struggle when they see them in conflict. This may lead pastors to preemptively step in, or insert themselves, when they see conflicts arising within the church. While such a heart is a good thing, many people are capable of working things out on their own. In fact, Matthew 18:15 indicates that conflict resolution should start between two people, not two people and their pastor. Pastors inserting themselves prematurely into a conflict may heighten its intensity and can blow things out of proportion. Pastors need to know when to step in and address conflict, but they also need to know when stepping in would make things worse.

## STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION<sup>5</sup>

When stepping in to address conflict it’s important to understand that people have very different ways of dealing with conflict. While people will likely fall somewhere in between these categories it is helpful for pastors to understand that people may respond very differently to his request that everyone get together to talk about the issue at hand.

*Avoiding* – Many people will avoid conflict at any cost. When conflict arises they retreat and turn inward. Rather than addressing a conflict they will often suffer and simmer in silence. Pastors need to focus on patiently drawing avoiders into discussion and making them feel comfortable talking about the conflict.

*Accommodating* – Accommodators seek to end conflict by making everyone happy. Accommodators may see themselves as helping when they “give in” for the sake of peace. Pastors may need to help accommodators express themselves as opposed to focusing on making everyone else happy and jumping to a quick reconciliation.

*Competing* – Competitors are in it to win. They embrace conflict and are often open and outspoken about it, dominating both avoiders and accommodators. This does not make them inherently in the wrong; they may be driven to pull everyone together for the sake of the church and may help pastors move discussion forward. However, pastors may need to temper them so other voices may be heard.

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church*.

## TYPES OF CONFLICT IN THE RURAL CHURCH<sup>6</sup>

In the rural church pastors will face different forms of conflict. Similar to the styles of conflict, different forms of conflict should be handled in different ways.

*What* – These conflicts center around values and beliefs. What does the church believe the Bible says about abortion, homosexuality, or women serving on the church board?

These issues are both the easiest and most difficult for pastors to address. They are the easiest because they are addressed by looking at the Scriptures talking about them together and moving toward a common understanding, something pastors are often well equipped to do. “What” conflicts are the most difficult for pastors because there is rarely room to compromise.

*How* – These conflicts center around how things are done at the church. How should the church worship? How should the church be decorated? How should the much needed kitchen renovations be done?

In these situations there is often a common goal: the church agrees that they should worship God, decorate the church, or remodel the kitchen. The conflict comes from differing opinions on how it should be done. In these cases the pastor

should seek to emphasize those common goals and help people understand that their differences are a matter of “how” rather than “what” the Bible has to say. In these cases there is great opportunity to teach about grace and godly accommodation.

*Who* – These conflicts center around interpersonal differences.

In these situations a conflict arises between two members of the church, or even between a member and the pastor. In these situations it’s important to get the respective parties together to talk about the issue. While the stated issue may be conflict over who will choose this year’s VBS curriculum, pastors would do well to understand that there may be a deeper issues such as hurt over an unsolved issue from last year’s VBS or a request for help that was ignored two months ago. In rural communities where communication and the expression of feeling are not always embraced, creating an opportunity to address and talk about that core issue is essential.

## PRAYER

The importance of prayer should not be overlooked. It’s good to understand styles of conflict resolution and the different types of conflict that arise, but what sets pastors apart from other potential mediators is spiritual ministry. Pray before you meet with people, pray as you sit down together, and pray for

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from notes on Ron Klassen’s seminar *Navigating Through Conflict in a Familiarity Breeds Contempt Environment*.



them and God's work even after it seems that resolution has been found.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Collins, Gary R. *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3rd ed. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

Shawchuck, Norman. *How to Manage Conflict in the Church*. Indianapolis, IN: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1983, 1989.

Shelley, Marshall. *Well-Intentioned Dragons: Ministering to Problem People in the Church*. Minneapolis: Bethany Houses, 1994.

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## **Anger**

#### **ANGER IN THE RURAL CHURCH**

In rural communities where everyone is connected, most people want to avoid public expressions of anger. This is because an angry outburst at the feed store can soon become a topic of discussion at the post office, in the quilting circle, or in Sunday school, and it becomes a story that they hear about at the feed store for years to come. In an effort to avoid such embarrassment, many rural people will try to avoid these feelings of anger by pushing them down inside. However, burying anger does not avoid it; it simply delays its consequences.

#### **ANGER IS EXPRESSED IN DIFFERENT WAYS**

The anger in the lives of people often ends up expressed in a number of unhealthy ways.

*Outwardly* – Outbursts of red-faced shouting and swearing are what people often associate with anger. Those who express their anger in this way may justify it by saying that they are simply letting off steam.

*Passively* – Passive anger is expressed outwardly but in more subtle ways, like being unusually slow in helping someone or gossiping about them in the form of prayer requests. Passive anger can be troublesome because people may want to act like they are not angry or deny that they are acting out.

*Inwardly* – Inward anger is a hardening of a heart in bitterness and resentment that can lead to cold or cut-off relationships. This hardness may be a way for people to both punish and protect themselves from the cause of their anger.

*Redirected* – The focus of this anger is often times those unassociated with the problem in the first place. In many cases the recipients of redirected anger are those who cannot or will not speak up: spouses, children, or even the farm animals a person is working. Because their anger is being redirected, these people may assure you, and even believe, that they are not angry or upset about difficult issues in their life.

#### WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT ANGER

**James 1:19-20** - My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

**Proverbs 29:22** - An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.

**Proverbs 14:29** - A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.

**Colossians 3:7-8** - You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

**Ephesians 4:26** – “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry . . .

**Proverbs 10:12** - Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs.

**Galatians 5:22-25** - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

#### IS ALL ANGER BAD?

While we generally think of anger as a sinful thing, a number of times *in Scripture anger is described as an attribute of God*, such as God's reaction when Solomon turned away from him to worship other gods (1 Kings 11:9) or Jesus' response when the Pharisees wanted to criticize him for healing a man on the

Sabbath (Mark 3:5). These examples and many others seem to imply there is in fact a godly form of anger.

So what is godly anger? *Godly anger is an expression of God's love in response to sin.* As J. I. Packer says, in the Bible God's anger "is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil."<sup>7</sup>

This also sheds important light on passages like Ephesians 4:26, where Paul says, "In your anger do not sin," or James 1:19, where James exhorts believers to be "slow to become angry." Such godly anger should move believers to action in addressing such sin. A classic example of this might be the drive for believers to eliminate slavery. An example closer to home might be a husband's anger with his lack of concern for his wife leading him to reinvest in their marriage.

While there is godly anger, the truth is that *most anger pastors address is sinful rather than godly.*

#### **SPIRITUALLY ADDRESSING ANGER**

*Anger arises in response to sin.* Sometimes it's as simple as a cross word in a meeting or missed call at a high school basketball game. Sometimes it's a more general result of this

sinful, broken world, such as the mill closing down and the loss of a job. Sometimes it is not an actual sin but a perceived one such as not being asked to make a pie for the bake sale. It is important to help people think through what is happening in their life and wrestle with what the root cause of their anger is.

Especially in rural communities it's important to *give people an opportunity to talk about their anger* in response to this sin. They are unlikely to talk about it in public, they may not be comfortable talking about it with their spouse, and they may worry that talking about their troubles with friends will lead to gossip or slander. Because of this the pastor is one of the few people congregants may be willing to turn to provide a healthy opportunity for people to talk about their anger and frustrations.

However, as a pastor your goal is not to simply help them let off steam but to help draw them into the presence of God. This means it is important that you not only listen but also *help them understand God's grace as a response to sin.* Help them understand that while they have encountered sin, there is sin in their own life as well. Help them understand that God had every right to be angry over the sin in their life but chose to show grace instead.

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<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 136.

## HELPING PEOPLE AVOID ANGER

These four Rs<sup>8</sup> may help your congregants develop a healthy way to avoid anger in the future.

*Recognize* – Help them learn to recognize the signs that they are becoming angry. Do they tense up? Does their demeanor become much colder? Everyone responds to anger in different ways. How can they recognize it in themselves?

*Remove* – Encourage people to remove themselves from whatever situation is making them angry. This may be more difficult for people in rural areas, for they may feel that removing themselves from a situation is the same as retreating or giving up. It's important for you to help them understand that removing themselves is not giving up. Turning their tractor around because a field is too muddy is not retreating; it's common sense.

*Relax* – Talk to your congregant about what helps them relax and unwind. It's important for them to have some way, or some place to go, to relax. It may be hunting, fishing, knitting, or working in their garden. Whatever it may be, it's important for them to know what helps them relax and let go of that anger, and to encourage them to seek those things out.

*Return* – It's important that they are willing to return to that situation or conversation that lead to their anger with renewed attitude and understanding allowing calmer minds to prevail.

## FOLLOWING UP

Many people, especially rural ones, may feel that sitting down and talking with a pastor once about their anger is enough for them. It's hard enough to talk about their struggles, so they will assure you that a little prayer and pastoral insight have set them straight. However, the anger issues in their life did not arise in an hour, and they are unlikely to go away in an hour either. Therefore, it's good to follow up with them a couple of days or weeks later, depending on the severity of the issue.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Collins, Gary R. *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3rd ed. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Ronald Potter-Efron, *Healing the Angry Brain*, 110-11.

# Abuse

## THE REALITY OF ABUSE

Nearly 1 in 4 women<sup>9</sup> (22.3%) 18 and older in the United States have been the victim of physical abuse by a husband or boyfriend.<sup>10</sup> This violence isn't isolated in big cities and suburban areas. A 2015 study of rural pastors showed that 47% of pastors have faced situations of domestic abuse in their ministry, with 45% facing child abuse as well. The truth is that even in a small rural town, even in a church of thirty people, there is likely a woman who has been the victim of, or is currently the victim of, abuse.

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<sup>9</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Injury and Prevention Control: Division of Violence Prevention, "Intimate Partner Violence: Consequences," <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/consequences.html>.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that an increasing number of men have faced physical abuse as well: 1 in 7 men according to the same study. While this guide will focus on helping women who are victims, many of these same ideas can be used for men.

## AFRAID TO SPEAK UP

Most women will talk to someone else before they talk to their pastor about abuse. There are a number of different reasons why they might be afraid to speak up about the abuse in their life.

*Fear of retaliation* – Women may have been threatened about what will happen to them or their kids if word about their abuse gets out. Because of this a victim's continued safety should be paramount to pastors.

*Fear of losing everything* – If a woman's husband works on his family farm where they have a house and she drives his old pickup truck, speaking up could mean losing her income, her home, and even her transportation. Because of this pastors may consider providing material support for victims to help them feel more secure about addressing the issue.

*Fear of being looked down upon* – For some women the thought that everyone in church will know that their marriage is falling apart and fear that people will assume it's all her fault (which may have been reiterated by an abusive husband) is so debilitating that they choose not to speak up. Pastors should work to assure and comfort those who do speak up that they have done the right thing in breaking their silence.

## TYPES OF ABUSE

Abuse arises in many different forms. Some women may face emotional abuse by being isolated and cut off, preventing them from talking to friends and family. Some women may face verbal abuse by being shouted at and called terrible names. Some women may face physical abuse in the form of hitting, shoving, or having things thrown at them. Some women may even face sexual abuse from their husbands who feel that their wife's body belongs to them.

Because abuse can show up in many ways and may be called many different things, pastors would be wise to *ask women*, “Have you ever been afraid of your husband’s anger?” rather than “Have you ever been abused?” when concerns arise.

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

**Ephesians 5:25** - Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

**Psalms 11:5** - The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.

**1 Peter 3:7** - Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

**1 Corinthians 13:4-7** - Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

**Ephesians 5:28-30** - In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body.

## RESPONDING WHEN THE ISSUE ARISES

When a woman does decide to speak up about abuse in her life, pastors can remember these abcs.

*Affirm her* – She has experienced abuse from one of the most trusted men in her life. Understand that it is not easy for a woman to talk to a pastor about the abuse she is facing. The first words she needs to hear out of a pastor’s mouth are that she did the right thing in speaking up and that you are there to help her.

*Be sure she is safe* – Make sure that the woman is safe. If things have gotten bad enough that she has come to talk to you, then she should not return to that abusive situation. Even if her husband serves on the church board or is a well-liked

teacher in town, do not assume that this is a simple, one-time misunderstanding. Encourage her to stay with family, a friend, or even with your family if appropriate.

*Connect her with available resources* – Domestic violence is a wide enough problem that even in rural communities there are often resources available to help, whether it's through calling social services for your county or a women's shelter. It is important that you don't simply encourage her to do this but actively come alongside her and do it together. This helps her understand that getting help is the right thing to do.

#### **CONTINUED CARE**

It's important to understand that *your role is that of a social worker and a pastor*. As a pastor it is good to follow up on details like where a woman is staying and whether a police report has been filed or when a court date is scheduled. But while there may be other people who can help with those issues, there are few who can help addressing their spiritual hurt. It is good to pray for them and with them. But also be on the lookout for doors they may open to talk about their spiritual hurt and struggles, such as their role as a wife or their struggle with God's will for their family. It's important not to force these conversations, but it's also important to make the most of them should they arise.

#### **TALKING TO THE ABUSER**

When word gets out, and it will, that a wife has come and spoken to you, her husband may do so as well. He will often come to you looking for forgiveness (he does not want to feel bad about what he did) and eager for his wife to come home. A good place to begin is to *establish what happened*. This not only helps you get his part of the story, but also it causes him to verbalize what has happened. While he just wants his wife to come home, you need to *help him understand the harm he has done*. He may understand that he has sinned and done something wrong, but it is unlikely that he truly understands the effect it has had on his wife. Make it clear that while you are happy to talk with him about what has happened and work with him, *help him understand that neither of you control when his wife returns home*.

#### **WHEN YOU HEAR ABOUT SOMETHING**

Sometimes pastors hear about abuse second or third hand. The hard truth is that unless a wife wishes to step forward and talk about an issue there is little a pastor can do. However, if children are involved it is another story. If a pastor is aware of an abusive situation and children are involved, social services should be called. Pastors do not need to worry about someone showing up and taking a family's children away based on their call; it doesn't work that way. Instead a note is made in their file, and if a few notes come up, say from a

teacher, a neighbor, and a pastor, then social services may step in.

### **THE HOLY HUSH**

Rural communities are great at not talking about things. They often feel that if you don't talk about something then you don't have to deal with it. This attitude can have tragic consequences with respect to spousal abuse. When no one talks about it, women often feel like it is a problem that affects only them. This often makes them feel even worse because they feel like they must have done something extra wrong to be in their situation. Pastors can help victims be

willing to speak out by breaking this holy hush and talking about domestic abuse in a sermon or even with a sermon illustration. Anything you do to raise awareness of the reality of this issue will help women be more willing to address it in their own lives.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Many of the ideas in this section are adapted from the work of Nancy Nason-Clark, who established [www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org). RAVE stands for Religion and Violence E-learning. Its focus is on getting information to pastors, but there is also a map to help search for local shelters and resources.



APPENDIX C

REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK ON THE RURAL PASTOR'S GUIDE  
TO PASTORAL COUSELING

The following set of questions is designed to gain feedback on a quick reference guide for pastoral counselors in rural ministry that was put together based on research done in conjunction with a RHMA conference this past spring. The information you provide will help me understand how rural pastors might perceive this work and how it can be adapted to better fit their needs.

This study is being conducted as part of my DMin thesis-project at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing the following questionnaire you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study. It is estimated that it will take you about an hour to read through the guide and provide the requested feedback.

Please type your answers into this Word file, save it, and return it to me at [akipp@wordsofgrace.org](mailto:akipp@wordsofgrace.org). Also, if you have any questions about this questionnaire or the guide, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time and ministry.

**Please respond to the following questions reflecting on the Rural Pastor's Quick Reference Guide as a whole.**

*Issues Addressed:*

How do the issues addressed in the guide reflect the ones that you have faced in the course of ministry?

How do you feel the guide did in addressing the issues in a rural context?

Can you share any additional resources you would recommend to rural pastors that address the specific issues from the guide?

If one more chapter were added to the guide what issue would you suggest it address?

*Balance:*

Please share how you feel this guide did in balancing psychological and biblical insights. Do you feel it leans more heavily one way than another?

Are there any types of information or insights that you feel could be added to the guide to make it even more beneficial to rural pastors?

*Presentation:*

Please comment on the length of the chapters and the guide in general.

Please comment on the overall presentation of the guide. Is it put together in way that is appealing and easily accessible to rural pastors?

**For the following four questions, please choose a single chapter from the guide that resonated with you in your current ministry.**

Please state the chapter you will be reflecting on.

What information in the chapter seemed most beneficial to your ministry?

Was there anything you had questions about in the chapter or additional information you would like to find in the chapter?

Is there anything you would change about the chapter?

Finally, do you have any other impressions, thoughts, suggestions, or comments on the rural pastor's guide?

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## VITA

Adam Kipp was born November 3, 1981, in Columbus, Ohio. In 2004 he earned his bachelor of science in mechanical engineering from Ohio State University. Shortly upon graduation he married his high school sweetheart, Cara, and the two moved to Dallas, Texas. Adam graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary in 2008 with a Master of Theology degree. Within a month he was blessed with his first son, Max, along with his first pastorate, at Grace Bible Church in Washington, Illinois, where he continues to serve. In 2008 Adam was blessed with a daughter, Penny. In 2016 Adam was blessed with his third child, Felix. In February 2014 he began his Doctor of Ministry studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, with an expected graduation date of May 2017.